

Love under

The Blue Moon

Falling in love again

広瀬 未衣

Mii Hirose



An artistic illustration of a young woman with long dark hair, wearing a light blue t-shirt and a dark skirt, standing on a stone-paved walkway. She holds a transparent umbrella with a black handle. The background is a night scene with a large, glowing blue moon, a starry sky, and distant city lights reflected in water. The overall color palette is dominated by various shades of blue.

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Mii Hirose *AOI TSUKI NO YORU, MOU ICHIDO KANOJO NI KOI WO SURU*

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CHAPTER 1

My eyes fluttered open, the light intruding on my slumber.

“Ah, seems you’re awake,” said a familiar voice from nearby.

My mother stood in the corner of the room, and I gazed around to discover where I was — a wooden ceiling and foreign decor surrounded me.

“It’s already morning?” I questioned, blinking away the last traces of sleep.

“Yes, that’s right. You’re the only one still in bed, Keiichi,” she replied.

“Really?”

“Yes. Please get up quickly and help out.”

I reluctantly nodded as my mind cleared and recalled our situation — we had taken a trip from our home in Tokyo to Kyoto for a Buddhist service to honor my great-grandmother. We had stayed at my grandmother’s house the night before, sleeping on the unfamiliar tatami mats and futons. As it hurt my back to lie on them, I rose slowly.

The sunshine peeking through the sliding glass door cast a warm glow throughout the room.

“Keiichi, come quickly.” My mother opened the door and walked down the long hallway.

I replied, “I’m coming,” as she continued her instructions.

“Keiichi, could you please carry that cushion to the tatami room in the back?”

“Once you’ve done that, big brother, set the table.” My sister, Akane, had already gotten up and was helping out with the preparations and now bossing me around. As I dressed and headed to the living room, I knew what was expected of me.

“Ah, I’m exhausted,” I said with a sigh.

After the morning preparations, the monk’s entrance, and a successful Buddhist memorial service, the night banquet began. I couldn’t remember exactly how long my great-grandmother had been gone; I didn’t even know which anniversary this was for.

I glanced around at my relatives. The mourning cousins, aunts, and uncles exchanged stories, talking about their lives more than my great-grandmother. It seemed like a drinking party for us rather than a solemn Buddhist ceremony; I noticed the grownups watching us with bemused looks. Rather than praying for the deceased’s spirit, they were more focused on catching up with one another.

“Keiichi, thank you for helping us so much. You can leave your seat now,” my mother said, carrying an empty beer bottle.

I nodded and left the hall.

I heard Kyoto is hot in the summer because it is a basin. But tonight, Kyoto felt cooler than Tokyo. I left my great-grandmother’s house and headed toward the town. Arashiyama, where my great-grandmother lived, was a lush green town surrounded by rivers and mountains. The area had many temples and was a popular tourist destination.

I had come to this town many times since I was a child, and I used to love playing in Arashiyama at night after the tourists had left. On this day, I walked around the town at night, remembering my childhood.

As I approached the Togetsukyō Bridge, I could see the Oi River flowing slowly. In the distance was the graceful figure of Arashiyama, like a painting. I couldn’t help but pause on the lit-up bridge and gaze towards the horizon, where Kyoto Tower stood diminutively in the distance.

I thought, *I’ve come back.*

As I stepped into the town, a feeling of nostalgia and warmth enveloped me. The sky was dark blue, and the full moon reflected in a bright white-blue hue.

The moonlight snuck out from between the clouds, creating a path for me to follow.

I took this path, which led northwards and gradually uphill, until I reached a temple on my left and five small Jizo statues smiling at me at the front. To my right sat a train station, but now all the souvenir shops around it were closed, their gray shutters down.

At an intersection, I turned right, then left, before finally making a right turn onto a dirt road lined with grass and trees. My heart thumped as I continued down this unfamiliar road that had been illuminated for me like a spotlight, thanks to the silvery light of the moon peeking through the tall treetops.

The thrill of going to a new place never faded, as I could always feel how my heart raced. I stepped forward fearlessly along the mountain path, and then there it was — a landscape that seemed to stretch for miles in front of me. With the deep blue night sky above me and a spring before me, everything around me was one solid brilliant blue. I walked closer to the spring.

The mountain path opened up to a beautiful spring surrounded by lush green trees. I heard a noise like water splashing, and when I looked closer, a girl was squatting on the edge of the spring with an umbrella in her hand — not to keep out the rain but pointed downward under the moonlight. She looked as if under a spotlight, and I couldn't take my eyes off her.

She put her open, see-through umbrella into the fountain, scooped some water, and peered in with a smile. She looked like a small kid playing goldfish scooping.

I heard the crunch of leaves beneath my feet as I stepped forward without realizing it.

Did she hear the sound?

We locked eyes. She was a beautiful sight: fair skin, long limbs, a waterfall of straight black hair over her shoulders, a straight nose, a tiny mouth, and an overall neat, tidy demeanor. The idea of her looking like a child dissipated quickly as I took in how gorgeous she was. Her big eyes grew wider, and her small mouth opened, almost as if she had seen something out of this world. It felt like she was asking me, “Are you a ghost or something?”

Without thinking, I answered, "I'm not."

She looked at me, saying, "Oh, okay. I thought you looked like somebody else."

I changed the topic and asked her what she was up to. She lifted her transparent umbrella and said, with a hint of embarrassment in her voice, "This? I wanted to catch the stars."

The quiet lake in front of us had many stars falling on its surface. The water stayed still no matter how hard the wind blew; only its surface moved, with a faint shadow of the moon in the middle.

I followed the direction of her gaze and glanced up at the night sky. A bright blue full moon was much closer than usual, and countless stars twinkled around it. I realized I probably couldn't see such a sight from the city where I lived.

As we were admiring the night sky, she asked me, "And you?"

I lowered my eyes, saying, "I was wandering around Arashiyama until I found myself here."

"Here? You just decided to come on your own?"

"Well, yes," I answered.

She laughed before asking, "This place isn't very well-known. How did you find it?"

"I guess by chance," I replied.

"Where are you from?"

I took that as a sign she wanted to keep talking, so I sat beside her; the coldness of the ground seeped through my clothing.

"Tokyo," I simply said in response. Our eyes locked, and I couldn't help but admire her long eyelashes and delicate double lids framing her beautiful crescent eyes that were both wide and luminous.

The sound of the wafting grasses of summer filled the air.

"Oh, I see. So you were sightseeing?"

“No, we went to my Grandma’s house for a Buddhist memorial service. My parents and I came back together.”

“So, what do you do at a Buddhist memorial service?”

“Huh? Don’t you know? We all gather early in the morning, listen to the Buddhist priest chant sutras, eat food, chat, and stuff like that. Even though it is enjoyable for older adults, it is quite dull for children. It’s pointless.”

After I spoke, she chuckled and said, “Pointless, eh?”

I felt embarrassed by my words. Despite my making fun of my relatives' practices, their ideas had obviously rubbed off on me. I laughed nervously to avoid answering her and mumbled, “Ha-ha.”

She wore a plain light blue T-shirt with jeans and white sneakers. Her long hair fluttered in the wind and returned to its original position.

“So, what did you do today that was boring you?”

She’d changed my word ‘pointless’ to ‘boring.’ The accent of her Kyoto dialect sounded slightly different as well.

“Hmm?”

She repeated the sentence then brushed her locks away from her face. She was so attentive that it made me happy.

“Boring me just left the banquet,” I said.

“Oh yeah?”

“I took a stroll around Arashiyama...”

“Go on.”

“I kept heading up the hill until I reached the forest.”

“Ah, that’s why you came here?”

“Yes, I had arrived.” Our voices overlapped.

We had only just met, but we spoke as if we’d known each other for years. Maybe it was because of her gentle vibe and those cat-like eyes.

“What’s your name?” I asked in a quiet tone.

“Saki Komiya,” she answered.

I wondered whether to call her Komiya-san or Saki-san? *San* sounded awkward; *chan* would be too intimate. While I pondered what to call her, she interjected, “And you?”

“Keiichi Tani,” I replied.

“How old are you?”

“Seventeen.”

“Same here. We’re exactly the same age,” Saki smiled.

Saki seemed older than she was, with a lovely face and a calm way of speaking. When I spoke to her, however, I felt she was a little immature.

Not quite... Maybe I was wrong; perhaps it wasn’t childishness. It dawned on me that Saki had an unpretentious personality, unlike the many people full of flattery and false faces. Her gentle air made me want to keep her close to me and talk.

“What should we call each other? Tani-kun? Keiichi-kun?” Saki asked in a hesitant voice.

“It doesn’t matter,” I replied.

“Okay, then Keiichi-kun it is. Um, for me...”

“Saki-chan? Is that okay?”

“No, just Saki.” She smiled warmly. “Everyone calls me Saki.”

“I understand.”

I thought about calling out to her in my mind; before I knew it, she was smiling at me. We discussed various topics like school and hobbies; interestingly, her favorite hobby was drawing.

“Do you take this hobby seriously?” I questioned.

The vision of a model standing in the middle of a group of individuals while Saki sketched them crossed my mind.

Saki shook her head. “No, it’s more for fun than anything.”

“Mainly, I do it when I’m alone,” she stated. “I’m either reading manga or drawing pictures, since I don’t really like novels.”

Perhaps she was referring to self-study time at school? My school had that too, but that was in elementary. I always read books during that time. Drawing was something I was never any good at, so I have always been filled with admiration for those who could do it.

“So, do you draw manga?”

“Nope. I make landscape art, like what I observe in my bedroom or this spring season. That’s all I doodle.”

“Don’t you draw people?”

“No, not me.” She glanced down and added, “It would be better to say that I do not possess enough skill instead of saying that I cannot draw people because they are complex.”

After these words, she closed her lips and smiled. A part of me wanted to one day witness the artwork made by her hands. I was certain the colors displayed in those pieces would exceed anything created by imagination.

“Keiichi-kun, what do you like to do in your free time?”

As soon as I was asked about my hobby, I answered without hesitation. “Ah, my interest is soccer.”

“How long have you been playing?”

I counted on my fingers and responded, “Let’s see... it has been seven years since I started back in fifth grade.”

Suddenly, I felt a wave of nostalgia for when I’d first started out — without a uniform, shouting from the sidelines during scrimmages, and sprinting around the field with a numbered brightly colored pinny.

The next question brought me back to reality.

“What role do you play on the team?” she probed.

“I’m a defensive midfielder,” I replied. “Though I don’t expect you to know what that means.”

“Of course, I know,” she exclaimed. “I love watching soccer on TV.”

I was pleased that she considered what I liked a worthwhile subject of conversation.

“Do you have a favorite team?” I asked.

A smile spread across her face as she answered, “Yes. It’s Kyoto Purple Sanga.”

“It’s because of my love for my hometown,” she explained. She regaled me with stories of soccer, her knowledge, and passion that seemed to surpass mine — making me chuckle. Then, she checked her watch and gasped.

“Oh, no! It’s already late. I must get back, or I’ll get caught.”

She jumped up, dusting the dry leaves off her jeans. Was she out past curfew? Looking at her worried face, I asked, “Curfew?”

“Um... actually, I missed it,” she said sheepishly.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Yeah, I won’t get caught if I sneak back in,” she answered mischievously. Her expression was irresistibly cute. But still, her parents would be angry if they found out she was out too late.

“I’ll walk you home,” I offered.

“No, it’s alright. Your grandma’s house is just down the mountain, right?” she replied quickly.

“That’s right,” I said hesitantly, unsure if letting her go alone was a good idea.

Suddenly, she continued, “It’s really close by, so don’t worry about it. I’ll take your good intentions as my guide. Thank you.”

With that, we parted ways. She flashed me a tender smile, and I simply replied, “Sure.”

“See you later,” she said as she gave me a wave.

“Hold on,” I hollered after her.

I hesitated, unable to comprehend what exactly I wanted to ask her. After a few moments of contemplation, the purest question that came to mind slipped

through my lips.

“Saki, have you been coming here every night recently?”

“Yeah, pretty much,” she responded with a nod. “Until the blue moon ends.”

A gust of wind blew by me and rustled the trees in the deserted streets. That’s when I heard it — the phrase that caught my attention: blue moon. I glanced up at the sky; it was awe-inspiring. A deep azure hue radiated from the full moon, making it seem surreal and out of this world, almost as if it had something to tell me. Could this mysterious color be from the so-called blue moon?

“I’m home!”

The sound of the doorbell echoed when I opened the entranceway. Nobody answered me from inside, yet the many shoes lined up during the day had vanished, indicating that everyone had already gone off to bed after attending the memorial service. Quietly and gently, I shut the sliding door and removed my shoes before entering the house.

My grandmother’s house was a conventional wooden home in the midst of nature, with a broad garden adorning its veranda. As I strolled along the veranda toward my room, I spotted a perfectly shaped pine tree, a bonsai plant, and flower beds in the distance.

Gazing at the night sky absentmindedly, I observed a full blue moon peeking through the eaves. I had never before paid attention to the phases of the moon, as it seemed of no concern to me. But tonight, I truly examined its color and shape, studying it intently.

“I’ll stay here until this blue moon ends,” her voice echoed in my head. She said it with a slight tinge of loneliness. Her tone captivated me as if the story she was reading had an unexpected conclusion. I sat on the veranda and pulled out my smartphone from my pocket. I opened the browser and typed *blue moon*.

“Wow. That’s interesting.”

At that moment, an eerie figure appeared behind me, illuminated by the light from my phone, giving it a pale blue hue reminiscent of horror films.

I stepped back, turning around in trepidation. “Granny.”

And there she was.

“Huh? Who is it?”

“Who do you think?”

The darkness must have clouded her vision, and she was unable to see who it was.

“It’s Keiichi,” I responded.

“Oh, really, it’s Keiichi...”

Granny turned on the porch light and looked at me with surprise in her aged eyes.

“You don’t have to be so surprised.”

“What’s the matter? ...What brings you here at this hour?”

“No reason. I just couldn’t sleep,” I lied.

“So, you came all the way here to catch the night breeze?”

“That’s right.”

Her voice was a little lower than I thought it would be.

“I see. Well, take your time,” Granny said as she turned toward her room.

“Oh, wait. Granny,” I called to her back, and she slowly turned around.

“What?”

“Do you know what a blue moon is?”

“A blue moon?”

“Yeah. A blue moon.” I shrugged.

I had always admired how wise Granny was. She had taught me everything I knew since I was a child — things my parents could never have imparted to me. But even she didn’t know about a blue moon.

The silence between us stretched taut for a few moments before I shrugged. “Never mind. Forget I asked.”

Granny sat on the veranda and peered at my face.

“Grandma, what are you doing so close to me?” I said with a hint of annoyance.

“Ah, now I get it.” Granny smiled as if she had come to some realization. “Keiichi, do you know how many times the moon completes its cycle in a month?”

I didn’t know much about the moon and rarely got to witness a full moon, so I hazarded a guess. “Once?”

“Correct. One time in a month,” Granny explained.

“Oh, okay.”

Granny was incredibly knowledgeable and knew things I didn’t. I lent her my attention to listen to her story.

“However, most months consist of thirty or thirty-one days, except for February, right?”

“Yes.”

“So the full moon cycle, which takes 29.5 days, gradually shifts over time. And every few years, there will be months where two full moons occur within the same month,” Granny said as she looked up at the bright full moon in the night sky.

“Whoa...” I couldn’t help but let out an impressed sound.

“The phenomenon of two full moons appearing in one month is referred to as a blue moon,” Granny added before smiling knowingly.

As I gazed at the moon, I felt inexplicably drawn to it. It shined a mesmerizing blue — the first blue moon of the month.

My grandmother sighed admiringly, her voice carrying off in the night sky. “It’s a rare thing to see a blue moon,” she said softly.

Do the math, I thought. If this is August 1st, the second blue moon will fall on the 30th.

Still looking skyward, I asked my grandmother, “What makes it a *blue* moon?”

She regarded me calmly before explaining that there are various theories. But one suggests that the extra full moon in a month has an especially bluish hue.

“Why did you ask about the blue moon?” my grandmother shifted her gaze to me and asked quietly.

I couldn’t bear to look her in the eye and kept my eyes trained on the night sky as I spoke. “Because... I saw it just now.” And yet, here it was again; even once it had set, I still felt its presence.

“Ah.” She smiled. “Then let me tell you about a legend passed down in this town.”

An icy shiver coursed through my body. My parents had warned me of this very day; they were staying later than usual for a memorial service and had expressed concerns about Granny living alone since Grandpa passed away. *So, this is it*, I thought with regret.

“What legend?” I prompted.

“Where the light of the blue moon leads... there lies an entrance to the past,” she said slowly as if testing each word on her tongue.

With a deep sigh, I looked back up at the magical blue moon and whispered almost wistfully, “Oh, no.”

The surprise was evident on my face. Grandma had just said something strange. Did she have dementia?

“Sorry, Grandma. Are you cold? You’ll get sick if you stay outside in this cold” I said as I stood up and gently held my grandmother’s arm while she sat on the veranda.

“What? Why so suddenly?” She tilted her head curiously and eventually got up to follow me.

“It’s too hot to be cold, Grandma. Come on.”

“I don’t need to be treated like an old lady,” she said with a scolding tone but soon softened with her familiar and ever-present gentle smile.

“Alright, alright. I understand. Let’s go back to your room and rest,” I replied quickly before supporting her tiny arm with one hand and placing the other on her frail back as we walked toward her room.

The blue moon shined brightly from the corner of my eye as we moved through the veranda.

When I entered the kitchen, my mother was busy preparing miso soup.

“Good morning,” I greeted her.

She glanced up from her stirring and responded, “Keiichi, you’re up early today.”

My little sister, Akane, who was helping our mother, looked at me in surprise and rather than return the traditional greeting, commented, “Wow, you’re right. Big brother is up so early during summer vacation.”

“That’s rude. I wake up early sometimes.”

“Well, Kyoto nights are hot. I’d be surprised if you could sleep in.”

“Yeah... you’re right,” I answered vaguely, not wanting to reveal that yesterday’s encounter with Saki had kept me awake all night. Her round eyes and long eyelashes were burned into my memory. Her fair skin and voice, slender fingers, and the words she spoke kept repeating in my mind in bed until my chest felt like it was about to burst.

My insides churned with a mix of emotions, but I didn’t have time to reflect on them much. Instead, I’d go to meet Saki again that evening.

“Keiichi, can you put the rice on the table?”

“While you’re at it, also take the chopsticks.” I heard Akane’s voice coming from the kitchen, scolding me while I daydreamed on the couch. She was always bossing me around like that when we were at home.

“Oh, sure. No problem.”

After eating breakfast, we were relaxing in the living room when my phone buzzed in my pocket. Akane noticed it first and motioned for me to take the call quickly. Did she really want to watch TV that badly?

“Alright, alright,” I said as I headed to the veranda. It was Yuuya Murata from Tokyo — an old friend of mine. My curiosity was piqued as I hit the answer button and greeted him with a warm “Hello.”

As we talked, I took in my serene surroundings; the fresh spring leaves rustling in the breeze and the earthen scent of the soil. Suddenly, something unexpected happened.

Someone yelled “Kei-kun!” on the other end of the call, shocking me back into reality. It was a girl’s voice.

“Uh... sorry, who’s this?”

“It’s Sakura, silly.” She giggled.

“Oh, hey, Sakura-san. What’s going on?”

Sakura was Yuuya’s girlfriend, and we’d hung out with them a few times before. She was always so energetic and adorable — I think she was one year older than me.

“Hey, don’t call without asking first. Sorry about that,” Yuuya intervened in a low voice as he snatched the phone from his girlfriend. “Are you feeling better now, Keiichi?”

I couldn’t help but question his slightly annoyed demeanor. “Hey, is everything alright? What’s up?”

“Keiichi, you’re in Kyoto, right?” he asked abruptly.

“Yeah, why do you ask?”

“When are you coming back?”

“I’m not sure yet. Why?” His questions were starting to bother me.

“Okay, got it,” he said simply before getting straight to the point.

“Huh? What’s going on?” I could tell something was up and prodded him further.

“Well, Sakura’s friend wants to meet you.”

Even though I had no clue who this mysterious person was or why they wanted to meet me, I already knew Yuuya must have been quite irritated at having to make such a request. That was just like him.

“Why, though?” I asked again, hoping for an answer.

“Well...” he sighed heavily. “Remember the school festival we had in the spring?”

“Yeah, I remember that.”

“She was there with Sakura that day.”

I recalled Sakura visiting our class, but I couldn’t recall her friend. When he mentioned that there was a girl next to Sakura, something sparked in my memory, though I still couldn’t quite place it.

“She saw you, and it was love at first sight.”

Love at first sight?

“I didn’t say you could spill everything!,” Sakura’s voice sounded irritated on the other end of the line.

“Then you talk to him.”

“I told you from the beginning that I was going to call him.”

An argument could be heard through the phone. *Such disputes should be handled after hanging up.* After all, summer days in Kyoto were already sweltering enough.

“Keii-kun?” Sakura answered the call.

“Yes?”

“It’s like what Yuuya said earlier.”

And she summed up what he had said. Despite that, I felt nothing had changed, so I chuckled lightly.

“My friend wants to meet you, Keii-kun. You don’t have a girlfriend now, right? When you get back from Kyoto, why don’t we all hang out together, including my friend?”

“—wants to meet you?”

The words “love at first sight” and “wants to meet you” flashed through my mind. Could meeting someone be the same as falling in love? My thoughts drifted to Saki, with whom I had shared beautiful star-gazing moments back in that spring. Was I falling for her right now?

A sense of relief spread through me as I firmly said, “Sorry, I won’t go.”

“Huh?”

“Sorry. I’ve got someone I’m interested in.”

My chest felt lighter; a weight seemed to have been lifted from my body.

CHAPTER 2

The starry night seemed to go on forever.

“I’m only here until the blue moon ends,” she said in a clear, cat-like voice. The pale blue moonlight was shining on her, and I wondered why she was at this mysterious place during a blue moon. She looked at me without flinching, telling me an array of stories.

My thoughts drifted to Saki, and with it came the realization that I had to visit her again and discover my true feelings for her. The hours went by as the air filled with the gentle sweetness of summer flowers.

Grandma was bent over, tending to the flowerbed on the western side of the garden. With her watering can, she showered each flower with love, making sure all were well taken care of. I could still see them all reaching for the sun this morning.

Slipping into my sandals, I made my way up to Grandma, who turned around upon hearing my footsteps behind her.

“I got this,” I said

“Are you sure about this?” she asked me as she handed me the canister full of water.

“Absolutely,” I smiled confidently and took it from her hands.

“Thank you, dear.” Grandma sat on the porch and watched me as I tended to the flowers. Marigolds, petunias, daisies, snapdragons — all these vibrant colors created a beautiful symphony of sorts when covered with water. What was the name of that bright yellow one again?

Although there were some I couldn’t remember, my grandmother had lovingly taught me their names throughout the years they had been growing together in this flower bed.

“Keiichi,” she said softly, “you’ve grown up, haven’t you?” Grandma said.

As I was tending to the garden, a voice called out from behind me. I continued to water the plants and replied, “Do you think so?”

“Yeah. You have certainly grown taller. Your back and hands seem wider too.”

Indeed, my growth spurt had caused me considerable discomfort during summers in junior high school.

“You have grown into a kind child,” she said.

I could not understand what made her say this all of a sudden. Then she added with deeper affection, “Keiichi, you have grown to be such a good kid.”

Whenever adults expressed their approval of me in this manner, I felt embarrassed yet overwhelmed with joy.

It was particularly meaningful when my grandmother said it — it reminded me of how lucky I was to have her in my life. I responded timidly, trying to conceal my happiness, “That’s not true.”

The flower beds were flourishing with various colors and shades of blooms, surrounded by vibrant green trees. With my watering can empty, I decided to fetch some more water from the tap. Carrying the heavy metal container back and forth seemed like an arduous task for elders like my grandma; hence, I wished it would rain during summer.

However, it’s not always feasible for rain to fall exactly when needed, so I had to go out and buy a hose for the garden. Living with elderly people was full of challenges that only someone living in the same house could understand. But Grandma never grumbled about them... a sense of unease swelled up within me as I thought about leaving her behind in Kyoto when I returned home.

“Hey, Keiichi, are you off to town again today?”

“Yeah, there are a few things I need to get.”

“Well, while you’re out, could you grab some croquettes from Nakamura-ya for us?”

“Sure, I’ll grab them now,” I said after watering the plants. The summer sky was high, and white clouds floated above. It didn’t seem like it was going to rain after all.

“I’m going, too,” My younger sister, Akane, called from the entranceway. She’d been listening in on our conversation from her spot by the flower bed. “Hey, are you going to town today, Keiichi?”

“Yeah, I am. Why do you ask?”

“I want to come with you.”

I smiled at her enthusiasm. “Sure, you can come.

“What about mom?” I asked.

“She’s actually going to a reunion today.”

I shrugged, indicating that parents have their own lives to enjoy.

So, Akane and I went off to Arashiyama — it teemed with people in the daytime. Grandma said that Arashiyama in the summer had nothing on the beauty of cherry blossoms in spring and autumn leaves. But we made our way through the crowd regardless. We started from Togetsukyō Bridge and walked north down the main street looking for Nakamura-ya’s croquettes; one could buy fresh ones right outside the storefront. As far as I was concerned, those croquettes were unbeatable — no other croquette compared. We turned right at Tenryū-ji Temple along Arashiyama Street.

As we left the main road, the hustle and bustle of the crowds faded until there was nothing left but us. We took leisurely strides past a variety of cafés and tea specialty stores littering the walkway, before my gaze finally came upon Nakamura-ya in front of an ancient railway bridge. The iconic brown flag was an indicator of Arashiyama’s famous beef croquettes, as well as the alluring aroma, which sparked memories from long ago.

I made my order with certainty. “Thirty croquettes, please... and two more which I will eat here.”

My sister gave me a dubious look, noticing how many I had asked for. “You really think you can eat that much?”

I grinned widely in response. “How could I resist? There’s no way I’d turn down such delicious food.” Enough to feed my family of six — not to mention two extra to savor right away. I requested my order be wrapped up for takeout.

Then, I quickly grabbed one of them and enveloped it in white paper before passing it to Akane.

“It’s so good. But hot,” she said between mouthfuls, struggling with the freshly fried pastry.

“Take your time,” I replied calmly. “Nobody is going to steal it from you.”

“I know, but it’s too tasty — I can’t help but eat it fast,” she exclaimed, fully consumed by the flavor as she inhaled her snack.

I laughed at her excitement as I enjoyed my own croquette.

“Hey, big brother, hurry up and eat.”

I could only see her eyes peeking through the white paper wrapping her face mask. She was trying too hard. I couldn’t help but let out a laugh.

After eating her delicious croquettes, she led me to the Arashiyama highway, where there were many stylish storefronts. We decided to go into one of the souvenir shops that had many female customers inside. I didn’t have any particular items in mind, so I waited outside while she shopped.

Looking around, I was reminded of last night when everything had been closed for business. It was amazing to see how lively it was during the day. Each store had its unique atmosphere, and there were various shops — bamboo handicrafts, Kyoto fans stores, cafés, and restaurants.

Suddenly, a couple wearing traditional kimonos passed us.

“Hey, wanna check out that store next?”

“Yeah, let’s do it.”

The two were conversing in the Kyoto dialect. Saki had done the same yesterday, so she must be from Kyoto. As they talked, I noticed a glimmer at my feet. I reached down and picked up a hair ornament with a multitude of stars at the tip — one large star at the end and several small ones beneath it like shooting stars. Its brilliance captivated me in the summer sun and stirred something inside me; it seemed this adornment was made for someone who longed for the stars.

“Big brother, sorry to keep you waiting.”

“Oh, it’s fine.”

I spent the day touring around Arashiyama with Akane. She shared interesting stories about her visits here and pointed out places I hadn’t seen before.

“We came to this temple before.”

“This bamboo forest is always amazing no matter how often you see it.”

My little sister spoke excitedly, her voice radiating with joy as we explored the area together.

Sighing, I asked Akane, “Don’t you think it’s enough to visit temples, shrines, and tourist spots just once?”

“But the colors of Kyoto change all the time,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“That’s what Grandma always said. ‘The colors of Kyoto depend on the season, weather, who you’re with, and even your mood when looking at something.’ That’s why it’s worth seeing beautiful things again and again.”

I nodded slowly as I felt her words dig into my heart. “Yeah... this place is so amazing that I would love to experience it in different ways over and over again.”

Akane smiled before continuing, “If the scenery of this city changes every time we look at it, then I want to see all the colors of Kyoto.”

I could feel my heart skip a beat as I pondered what Grandma had said. It was difficult to wrap my mind around the idea of colors changing, but I knew it meant something special to her and Akane. As we walked alongside the path through the straight, green bamboo, I could see a small grove in the distance.

We paused for a moment at the temple to give our respects before continuing on our journey. We were engulfed by the calming atmosphere of Kyoto; every single thing had a gentle touch or pale hue that blended harmoniously.

“Next, it’s Seiryō-ji Temple, right? And then don’t forget about Café Hanashirube.” My sister’s voice snapped me out of my trance, and she started

dragging me along. *Please, spare me.* An endless queue popped up as we walked toward the mountain lodge near Seiryō-ji Temple.

My sister and I stood in the long line, waiting to purchase some special Morika tofu. It was a specialty of Yudofu Sagano and our grandma's favorite. I felt dread as we waited, wishing we could just skip this.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity standing there, we made it to the front of the line. With our hands full of tofu boxes, we decided to take a break and have lunch at a nearby restaurant.

As soon as we entered the shop, Akane ordered dessert without even getting a meal. She was now eating parfait containing warabi mochi and sweet red bean paste in its bamboo container. You could also spot white shiratama and chestnuts, topped with a generous helping of whipped cream and a thin layer of black ice cream beneath.

"It's delicious." I was worried Akane might explode from eating so much.

"What kind of ice cream is this?" The black ice cream didn't look like either chocolate or vanilla.

Akane answered right away, "Black soybean ice cream."

Black soybean ice cream... never heard of it before. Is it any good?

"It's super delicious." Akane could read my mind; she responded without a pause.

"Akane, we should be going soon after you finish up."

"Alright. Oh, and there's one more place I wanted to check out on our way back."

The evening air filled the room, flowing in through the open window. A breeze carried with it the warmth of the day, but the temperature was still much lower than during the day.

We had spent all day running errands for my sister and grandma, but at least we managed to pass the time without too much trouble. Finally, night had come.

While I was gazing upwards to the night sky, the tranquil blue full moon illuminated brightly once again.

“That was a blue moon,” she said.

Saki came to the spring again today.

I grabbed my shoes from the entrance, and as I put them on, I noticed a small mirror resting atop the shoe cabinet. Intrigued, I carefully peered into it.

The pale blue moonlight illuminated my attire; today, I had taken more time to get ready than usual, and this was my favorite outfit out of all I had brought.

“Keiichi,” my mother’s voice echoed through the stillness of our house,” where are you going all dressed up?” I could feel a blush heat my cheeks but refused to meet her gaze in the mirror.

“Just for a walk.”

“You don’t look like you’re going for a walk at all.”

“See you later.”

I left the house without listening to my mother’s words until the end. Her intuition was sharp, so I thought leaving before she said anything else would be best.

My mom sighed at me, muttering something about being strange, as I swiftly left before she had a chance to press further.

I had no trouble finding the forest; the light of the blue moon ensured that. Heading down the silent path, my journey seemed guided by the moon’s brilliant hue. Tonight, my walking path was a stunning blue.

The large blue moon illuminated my journey. I arrived at the edge of the forest much faster than yesterday. I must have unknowingly broken into a jog. As I stepped into the forest, the breathtaking view opened up before me. The starry night sky illuminated the mountain trail adorned with trees and grass. As I took in this bluish landscape, a wave of amazement came over me.

I walked toward the spring, my heart beating louder and louder. Finally, I arrived. The only color to break the intense hues of blue was a cherry blossom-colored figure bent over the lake’s edge.

It was Saki playing with her umbrella, her delicate figure still that of a young child's. But when my gaze landed on her, I witnessed unparalleled beauty.

I slowly came closer and called out, "Can you really catch something with that?"

Startled, Saki paused and turned around to see who it was.

"Whoa, Keiichi-kun. You scared me there." She relaxed and gave a small smile.

"How long are you going to stay here? Trying to catch goldfish?" I joked while sitting down next to her.

"No, it's not goldfish," she corrected, pouting in mock anger.

"Is it stars?" I asked, only half serious.

"Ha! It's still not cool that you remembered something but guessed wrong." Despite her playful words, she wasn't actually mad.

"I'm sorry. Are you mad?" I apologized anyway, just in case.

The coldness of the ground seeped into my body even as a warm breeze blew past us. A few strands of hair fell over Saki's face, which she quickly brushed away before looking up at me again. Then, with a mischievous glint in her eyes, she said jokingly, "Ha-ha, gotcha. I was just messing with you. I'm not actually mad."

She was wearing a pink cardigan with a white shirt underneath. Her skirt was knee-length denim. She had on white socks and sneakers. Her simple outfit was the same as yesterday, but just changing from blue to pink made her look different. The pink cardigan made her soft smile look even gentler.

She carefully placed the umbrella at her feet and looked up at me with an expression of inquiry.

"Do you want to keep playing, or are you done?" I asked her.

"I'm done. You came after all."

"If I came here, would you stop playing by yourself?"

"Would you play with me?"

“That would be weird, right?”

We both laughed at that. Saki was always so thoughtful and considerate.

“You actually came,” she said suddenly.

I tipped my head in confusion.

“Uh...yeah?” Suddenly, it felt like she had been wanting to say something for a while and finally had the chance. I leaned closer to hear what she had to say.

“Hey, Keiichi, did you hear my response yesterday when you asked me, ‘Do you come here every night?’”

“Oh.”

“I was just asked. So, I didn’t know if you would come tonight or not.”

“Come to think of it, I didn’t say I would come tomorrow.

“Was it bothersome?”

“No, not at all. It’s not like that,” she hurriedly denied. I was just wondering if it was part of our conversation, like asking if you always come here or something. I’m not used to polite greetings. I don’t know what’s true or not, so I was a little confused.”

“Okay, sorry for not being clear. I want to come here every day while you are here.”

“...I see.”

“It’s boring at grandma’s house.”

She laughed and looked up at the sky.

“It’s boring,” she said, laughing.

She laughed when I said, “So this place is boring too, right?”

“Huh?”

“No, that’s not what I meant.”

I couldn’t wait to hang out with Saki, no matter where I was — Grandma’s house, the town square, or even at the mall. She was always in the back of my mind.

What was it about her that had me so captivated? I came here to discover the answer to that question. It certainly wasn't going to be dull.

How do I tell her how I feel? My vocabulary didn't seem sufficient for the task. What words would express my message clearly?

As I contemplated what to say, she grabbed a piece of paper and began writing something with a pen. Then she folded it up and put it under the umbrella before standing up.

"Well then, let's go have some fun."

"Huh? But..."

Is it okay?

I didn't ask Saki why she wanted to come to this spot, but I assumed it was because she wanted to stay here until curfew. I thought spending that time together at this place would be nice, so I was taken aback when she proposed the idea.

"It's okay. I wrote it down. Don't worry. I feel like I want to show you around. Maybe it's because I'm your big sister."

"We're the same age."

"Oh, I see."

Laughing with a girl who didn't seem older than me, I walked along the mountain path with her. Her steps were light, and she skillfully pushed aside the trees and grass stretching along the brown path.

She, being a local child, never slowed down or complained when we came across paths that didn't seem to be paths or when we had to walk up steep inclines. I admired her and thought to myself how impressive she was.

Suddenly, she stopped, and I followed her gaze to a point on the path ahead.

"Are you okay, Keiichi-kun?" Saki turned around and asked me.

I replied with a breathless "I'm okay."

I played soccer, but did walking on mountain paths use different muscles? Or was Saki just fast?

“We’re almost there.” She showed a cool expression as she spoke.

We soon reached the crest of the mountain. A low peak, it resembled a small hill rather than anything grand.

“Keiichi-kun, look,” Saki said, pointing to the view in front of us.

A cityscape that glittered with a million tiny stars spread out beneath us. The houses and apartments looked like toys on this peaceful summer night. It was a beauty unlike the stars we saw at the spring; this was artificial.

The lights blurred on the horizon, reflecting off the atmosphere of the night sky. We had an incredible view of Kyoto from our mountaintop vantage.

“That’s amazing,” I exclaimed in awe.

Saki smiled and nodded. “Yeah, I love this place.”

The artificial light made her profile clearer than before when she was backlit against the night sky. She stared out into the distant twinkling of lights and swaying neon signs and murmured, “It was such a nice day today, so I thought the night view would be beautiful for sure.”

“Yeah,” I replied.

“And then, I kind of wanted to show it to you too...” her voice trailed off.

The lights in the night sky twinkled and shined in her big eyes; she had seen the view many times before but still appreciated it. Her mesmerizing features — her long eyelashes, cascading hair, straight nose, and pink lips — were alluring to me.

“Thank you,” I mumbled.

“No, thank you for coming with me.” She smiled back warmly.

Her smile was so beautiful that it felt like time had stopped for a moment, and the stars were suspended in the air. She turned back to the sky, and I followed her gaze.

“It’s more beautiful when shared with someone,” she whispered into the night.

She had opened my world to a beauty I hadn't known, guiding me through what she saw as sacred in this place.

After a while, Saki pointed to the night view and said, "That ground and building you can see in the woods on the left — do you see them?"

"Yeah. Is that a school?"

"Yes. That's an elementary school."

"Then, what about that one over there?" I found a similar building in front of the forest across the river.

"That's the high school I'm attending now."

"Wow..."

So, this was a senior high school. It was a lot bigger than the elementary school. And the grounds were so vast.

"So, the one on the right is for the middle schoolers."

I had mistakenly thought it was one school with two different buildings.

"They're next to each other, huh?"

"Yeah, they share the same grounds since the number of students is small."

"I see..."

"What's your school like, Keiichi?"

"It's just an ordinary school. Nothing special. There's not as much nature around as here, and the land isn't as big. It's just a regular school in the middle of town."

"Is it fun?"

"Yeah, it's fun. What about you, Saki?"

"It's fun too."

As Saki fondly recalled her school days, I couldn't help but feel a wave of nostalgia as I watched her beam with joy. I didn't understand my own emotions. I shook my head and continued with my questions.

"What class are you in, Saki?"

“I’m in class two.”

“What about you?”

“I’m in class four.”

“Oh, different classes then.”

“Well, even if we were in the same class, it doesn’t mean we’d always be together, right?”

“Yeah, I know that, but still...”

What kind of high school life would we have if we were in the same class? If Saki was sitting next to me... If I said good morning, would she smile and say good morning back? I’m sure Saki would respond with a smile. After exchanging greetings, we’d walk on.

“Did you see Matsu-chan’s TV show yesterday?” Saki would ask.

“Oh, that one? It was really funny. That last joke, though...” we would spend the morning talking non-stop.

I might have felt slightly embarrassed by my thoughts, but it was nice to know we thought along the same lines. Even though we were not in the same physical place, our atmospheres seemed similar — that’s probably why we could be so comfortable around each other.

“Hey, Saki,” I said, “which mountain does the name Arashiyama refer to?”

“Do you know the Togetsukyō Bridge?” she replied.

“Yeah, that one. The bridge that you can see over there.”

“That’s right. The mountain to the south, beyond the Togetsukyō Bridge.”

“So, is all of that area Arashiyama?”

“No, the mountain on the other side of the river is called Ogurayama.”

Later, Saki showed me around the streets of Kyoto as we admired the night view. Her explanations were detailed and simple to understand, helping me become more accustomed to the town. I was delighted to learn more about this place I loved dearly.

“Oh...” I said in awe, noticing a small building lit up in the distance with flickering lights. It’s the same one we saw yesterday from Togetsukyō Bridge, but it appeared infinitely more extraordinary here.

“Is that Kyoto Tower?” I gestured toward the slender white body of the tower, its tip aglow in red. The brightness emanating from it was much different than the other buildings, almost as if it had been cut out and illuminated.

“That’s right. You’re correct. That’s Kyoto Tower.”

“Yes!” I was thrilled to have guessed it right. Even if I was not a local, I was glad to at least know about Kyoto Tower.

“Hey, did you know Kyoto Tower was designed based on the image of a Japanese candle?”

“Huh. Really?”

I just thought Kyoto Tower looked like a candle.

“That’s what my friend told me, but maybe it’s just an urban legend.”

“Is it?”

“Yeah. People in Kyoto usually call it a candle, but it was actually designed to be a lighthouse that illuminates the city without a sea. I just found out recently.”

“I wonder which one is true.”

I laughed, and she smiled back at me.

But to me, it still looked like a candle. Looking up at the small flame that lit up the night sky gave me a sense of calm.

“It looks like a candle to me,” Saki said, her gaze on the tower. “It reminds me of that too.”

“Yeah.”

“I celebrate my birthday here every year,” she went on.

“At Kyoto Tower?”

“Yes. I come here, admire the flickering light, and look up at the moon. Then I tell my mom that I’ve grown another year,” Saki explained while I tried to

comprehend what she meant by that.

“Tell your mom?”

“Yes. My mom... is on the moon.”

The moon was much larger than in the spring, seeming so close that one could almost reach out and touch it. Its pale blue light shined on us as Saki moved her lips faintly beneath its gaze.

“I am a child of the Hinata Dormitory,” she said, her small voice hoarse and trembling.

At that moment, I wanted more than anything to erase the fragile and melancholic tone of her words from the air and replace it with an innocent expression that suited her better, like when she described the city of Kyoto while looking up at the night sky or played with her umbrella in the spring.

So, I offered my encouragement: “It’s a nice name.”

“Yeah, maybe...” Saki murmured, her shoulders relaxing slightly.

I noticed a thin film covering her large eyes, and my heart sank when I realized they were filled with tears. Had I really said something wrong? Was there really any hope for someone like me to stand against a girl’s tears? All I could do was call her name again, desperately hoping she’d answer me as she kept her head down and tried not to let them fall. But there was no response.

Worried, I repeated, “Saki?”

However, I decided to give her time. I didn’t want to pressure her. After a moment, she lifted her head and looked straight at me with a calm smile on her face and said, “That’s not it... I’m happy.”

A warmth spread through my heart as I watched the expression of joy on her face, though I couldn’t tell what was making her so emotional.

“I’m glad,” I said with utmost sincerity, feeling utterly relieved that she wasn’t sad because of me.

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“Whoa. Keiichi-kun, are you alright?”

“No worries. I’m fine. Shall we continue?”

“It won’t be much longer.”

Although I wanted to ask about the cause of her tears, I chose not to for now. Instead, I asked casually, “Is the dormitory close by?”

Saki nodded and replied, “Yeah. Do you want to come with me?”

My heart thumped hard in response, and my feet stumbled on the trail involuntarily.

After fifteen minutes of walking along the mountain path, we eventually arrived at an open space in front of a tall gate. Saki whispered softly, “This way,” and we crossed into the dimly lit area where *Hinata Dormitory* was written across its entrance.

After we went through the gate, a big garden opened up in front of us. We could see two buildings on the land as we walked through the garden. One was a large concrete house with two stories. It was a fairly old building that could be recognized even in the darkness.

Next to it was a building that looked like a house. Compared to the big concrete dormitory, which looked old, the building looked new. Only the house-like dormitory had lights on, and we could hear laughter coming from inside. We could tell someone lived there.

The big dormitory, on the other hand, was completely dark. Was everyone asleep? Saki walked toward the dark, big dormitory. I followed her.

Saki opened the large door and stepped into the dormitory. “I’m back.” On the other side of the entryway, a large shoe box loomed against the wall, big enough to fit about fifty pairs of shoes, yet it was conveniently empty.

Saki set her footwear in one of the top left compartments, then motioned for me to do the same.

“Okay,” I replied, placing my sneakers where Saki had indicated.

I complied, following her as she sauntered down the hallway and activated the lights with a loud click. The room lit up, its brightness briefly stunning me.

“Ta-dah! This is my house,” Saki exclaimed, throwing her arms open wide, her enthusiasm palpable. What greeted us was a spacious living area — or, more accurately, a multipurpose recreation room.

I glanced at the end of the room; I saw a staircase leading upstairs and several doors where other personal rooms were located.

Saki looked at me as I took in my surroundings. “You’re surprised, huh?” she asked, her head slightly cocked with a concerned expression.

I replied, “Well...” It was the truth.

“Figures...” Saki gave a faint smile. “Keiichi-kun, you probably don’t know, do you? You’re not from around here,” she said.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“The significance of Hinata Dormitory,” she replied.

When I heard that name for the first time, I assumed it was just a dormitory for high schoolers. Maybe it had something to do with boarding schools.

However, as we followed the mountain trail, I understood the meaning of her tears and her words.

“I’m... from Hinata Dormitory.”

“My mother... is in the moon.”

Could this dormitory be...?

“This is an orphanage,” Saki quietly said.

“People around here tend to sneer when they hear about Hinata Dorm. But, Keiichi-kun, you didn’t have that reaction at all, did you? That’s why I felt happy and invited you here... sorry about that,” Saki said, bewildered.

I could not bear to see Saki so lonely again; why was that? All I wanted was for her to keep on smiling.

“Why are you apologizing?”

“Huh?”

“You don’t have to apologize. I’m happy,” I said.

“ ... ”

“I’m happy I could come to your house.”

It was common knowledge that, due to varying circumstances, there were places known as “children’s care facilities” for children who could not live with their parents to stay. But it was my first time visiting one, and I knew nothing else beyond that. Though we both understood this much, no changes were made between us.

I placed my hand on the white wall. “This dormitory reminds me of the children’s center I used to go to,” I said.

“A children’s center?”

“Yeah, my parents worked, so I often stayed at the children’s center until nighttime. It was kind of like after-school care now. There were over a thousand kids in my elementary school, and around two hundred of us would spend time there — it was really crowded. The shoe lockers couldn’t fit all the shoes, and our things got mixed up. It was really tough since there was no room to move, and we had to compete for space.”

“Ah, I see.”

“I had fun, didn’t I?”

Even though we’d been tangled up at the children’s center, we laughed together back then. This place had the same smell and atmosphere. When I looked down, there were scratches on the floor. Cute characters were scribbled on the walls, and the pillars served as height markers. I walked around the room.

“It’s spacious.”

Traces of children running around remained scattered all around us. They played and frolicked, leaving behind their memories.

“Really?”

“Quite.”

“How many people are here?”

“Um, about fifty.”

“Only fifty?”

If I think about it carefully, living with fifty people would probably be tough. But my words weren't a lie when I imagined a children's center where two hundred people spend their time.

“Fifty people sounds fun.”

When I said that, she showed me a gentle smile that sank into my heart.

“But are you sure?”

“What about?”

“Coming here at this time.”

If I was going to come over, I figured it should be during the day. I didn't want to disturb anyone. I peered up the stairs. Was everyone sleeping? Not a single sound could be heard. Maybe it was best to leave before waking them up.

I worried that Saki would get in trouble for bringing someone at this hour. I feared that if her situation worsened, I would also be affected, so I was about to say, “Let's try another time,” but she spoke first.

“It's okay.”

“Huh.”

“Right now, this place is just my house.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I own everything and can rent it out,” she replied.

I looked at her curiously.

“Keiichi-kun, you're frowning,” she said. She laughed lightly as she spoke.

I couldn't quite wrap my head around what she was saying, so I creased my brow in confusion. It's like she could read everything I was thinking just from the expressions on my face.

“It can be a bit confusing, right? Let me break it down for you.”

“Ah... okay.”

“In the meantime, do you want to come up to my room?”

She led me to a corner room on the first floor. It was large; about ten tatami mats and wooden floors, giving away its age. Several lockers lined the room, and there were signs of repairs. It was evident someone lived here.

I noticed a faint odor as I entered the room and took a few steps. I knew the smell but couldn't remember it for some reason. In front of a large window was something covered in white cloth.

“Um, please sit here. And don't stare too much.”

She had caught me looking around her room intently, and I could feel my face heat up with embarrassment.

“Sorry,” I apologized quickly as I sat where she had instructed.

You shouldn't be so nosy when visiting another person's space, I scolded myself, feeling foolish for not using common sense.

“Just kidding,” Saki said before walking over to a small refrigerator in the corner. She returned with two plastic bottles and a small bag of snacks.

“Do people say you're an honest person, Keiichi-kun?” she asked me.

“Not really,” I replied.

“You don't think so?” Saki smiled and handed me a bottle as I sat in front of a small table.

“Thank you,” I said, accepting the bottle.

Saki had given me a bottle of tea with the label *Oi Ocha*. We sat across from each other, and she flicked on the switch for the fan. We felt a cool breeze circulate around us.

“Hey, Saki,” I started, finally voicing what had been on my mind for a while now, “what do you mean by rented out?”

The dormitory was deathly quiet apart from our own room; no sign of life anywhere else. So I listened intently as she explained.

Hinata Dormitory was comprised of two buildings: one for junior high school students or younger and another for senior high schoolers with individual

rooms. The latter had to be expanded due to its limited capacity, which was why there was another dormitory next door, which was brightly lit.

“That one looks pretty new,” I said, looking out the window at the brilliant building standing tall against the silhouette of night.

“No. Everyone is happy with the individual rooms and the dormitories that look like ordinary homes, so they use them carefully, making them look cleaner than here. But they are quite old,” she replied.

Perhaps the darkness made the dormitory over there, which resembled a house, appear newer than the one we were in. The light emanating from it also seemed to radiate warmth.

“Huh? You’re a high school student. Aren’t you over there?” I asked her what had popped into my mind.

“Yes, that’s right. Usually, I live in that dormitory, but because there aren’t enough rooms, I share a room there. They only let me stay in this dormitory at night,” she replied.

“Does that mean there are extra rooms here?”

“Are there any leftover rooms? Well, actually, no one is staying here now,” Saki explained.

“Why not?” I asked.

“This dormitory is scheduled to be demolished. Everyone living here will be relocated, starting with the younger children who have already found new homes,” she told me.

“Oh.”

“The last child left three days ago. Now this dormitory is empty.”

Now I get what’s going on. “So, it’s like a private rental...”

“Yeah.”

The room filled with silence as if even the faint sound of the fan had been sucked out. A chilly breeze flowed between us, making the atmosphere even

more uncomfortable. I desperately searched for a topic to break the awkward silence and finally found one.

“Hey, um...” I said hesitantly, my words echoing off the walls.

Saki gave me a curious look as she waited for me to continue.

“What’s that white cloth hanging there?” I tried to recall the nostalgic scent that filled the room but couldn’t quite remember it. My curiosity was piqued by the object placed in front of the large glass window.

Maybe that was why Saki rented this room.

“This?” She gestured toward the white cloth before walking up to it and running her fingers along its edges.

“It’s a painting,” she replied.

“A painting?” I repeated, trying to recall our previous conversation.

“Oh, right. Your hobby is painting, isn’t it?”

Saki nodded. “Yes.”

“I would love to see it,” I said eagerly.

Saki looked surprised by my request.

“Huh? Really?”

“Yes, please,” I insisted. “I’m curious to see your work.”

After I made my request, I noticed a slight blush on Saki’s cheeks. The darkness of the night outside seemed to be pressing against the large window. As Saki stood there, her silhouette was etched into the blackness.

“It’s nothing special,” she said hesitantly.

“If you don’t want to show me, it’s fine,” I replied.

“It’s not that I don’t want to,” she said after hesitating for a moment.

“Okay, I’ll show you. But I don’t think it’s very good.”

As she pulled out a white cloth, I could tell she was giving a warning. Suddenly, the space was filled with colors, and I found myself staring at a beautiful spring scene.

The gentle flow of water looked just like the real thing, and the night sky above was painted with a large blue full moon and countless stars shining brightly.

As I looked closer, I noticed the blue full moon's reflection on the surface of the water, which added to the picture's beauty. And standing beside the spring was a little girl gazing up at the full moon floating in the night sky.

The world depicted in the painting was surprisingly blue and breathtakingly beautiful. It felt as if I knew the little girl in the world and the picture. I stood up and approached the painting, completely captivated by it.

"Is this you in the painting?" I asked.

Saki confirmed with a nod. "Yeah, you figured it out."

I examined the figure closely. "Did you draw the person too?"

Saki shook her head. "I usually stick to landscapes. Drawing people is not my forte. I don't have the skill for it."

I nodded in understanding.

"I've never tried drawing people before. But after saying goodbye to you yesterday, I decided to give it a shot for the first time and worked on this painting from last night until this morning."

Saki's level of concentration was truly remarkable. As I gazed at the painting, I couldn't help but feel she had infused it with her very essence. It was as if her power was imbued in every stroke of the brush. I had heard somewhere that creating art was a form of self-sacrifice, and that the soul of the artist was embedded in the work itself, able to captivate and move people.

It was clear that Saki had poured all her emotions into this painting. I could feel the depth of her feelings as I studied the intricate details and colors of the world she had created. It was a world I had never known, and its delicate and transient beauty left me in awe.

In the painting, Saki stood beside a serene fountain, depicted as a much younger version of herself. Despite her diminutive size, her presence was palpable, and I couldn't help but feel drawn to her image. This was a painting I would want to keep looking at for a long time to come.

Had Saki always lived there, since she was young? All alone, for a long time?

“Keiichi, you’re staring too much.” She laughed shyly. “Let’s stop now. I’m bad at it, and it’s embarrassing.” She tried to recover the painting with the cloth, but I reflexively grabbed her thin hand.

“Huh?”

“I still want to see it.”

“...”

“Is that okay?” If it was not okay, I’d give up. I didn’t want to do something Saki didn’t like.

But I really wanted to keep looking at this painting. It felt like I had found something important, like a landscape I had known long ago. I wanted to keep this painting vividly in my mind.

“I understand. But I... I think I’m thirsty,” she spoke haltingly, moving away from me and sitting in front of a small table.

She opened the cap of the plastic bottle she had brought earlier. As she lowered her head and sipped her tea, I returned my gaze to the painting. I was immediately drawn into it. Her painting moved people’s hearts. A piece of art created with the soul moves the soul of the viewer. My heart, which had always been said to be distant, was now so hot.

I wondered if it was because Saki had painted it. Or was it the power of the painting itself?

As I thought about it, I realized that even if I hadn’t known Saki had made the painting, I would have been captivated by it. If I could get my hands on it, I would want to keep it with me forever. As I immersed myself in the delicate use of colors, I found solace and healing. However, amidst the beauty, I couldn’t help but sympathize with the underlying sadness captured within the painting. The artwork evoked a mix of emotions, blending tranquility and melancholy in a way that resonated deeply with me.

I felt a light tap on my shoulder and looked to my right. Saki was handing me the bottle she had put on the table. “Keiichi-kun, you should drink it. The

mountain road was quite tough, right?”

Realizing how thirsty I was, I accepted it, opened the lid, and chugged down half the contents in one go.

Saki smiled and said, “Whoa. I’ve never seen someone drink that much at once.

“Is that enough?” she asked, pointing toward her creation.

“Yes, thank you,” I replied gratefully.

A sense of relief washed over Saki as she smiled. She then gently covered the painting with a white cloth, enveloping us once again in the colorless night.

We took our seats in front of a small table and engaged in conversation. Saki shared a range of stories with me, from tales about her roommate at the dormitory to anecdotes about the teacher at the facility she relied on. There were moments when she became exceptionally talkative. Although she tended to be reserved, once immersed in a topic, she couldn’t help but keep talking. I found great joy in listening to her stories, as our time together was truly delightful.

Saki suddenly spoke up. “Keiichi-kun, you’re a good listener, aren’t you?”

“Do you think so?” I replied.

“I do. Usually, I’m the one who listens rather than talks. I’m more comfortable in that role. But sometimes, I have this strong urge to express myself,” she said, her smile mirroring the attentiveness she usually showed her friends.

“That’s how you feel, huh?” I responded, feeling a similar sentiment.

“But is it okay? Am I bothering you?” she questioned, concerned.

“Not at all,” I reassured her. I had never once considered her voice or her stories a bother.

“Keiichi-kun, do you ever feel like doing something completely opposite of what you’re expected to do? Something that goes against people’s expectations?” she asked.

"I think so," I admitted, somewhat surprised by my answer. The words flowed naturally from my chest.

"Maybe it's because you're aware of those expectations. Sometimes, you want to break free from them, but it's not always easy, right?" she empathized.

Does the night have the power to draw out my honesty, or is it Saki who possesses that ability?

Emotions that had long been confined within me overflowed, filling my heart to the brim. "I'm the responsible older brother, the understanding one, the future captain of the soccer team. At times, the weight of these expectations feels overwhelming," I confessed. Yet, I've always concealed it, quietly navigating through life, suppressing my own emotions. ...Why did you ask that?" I asked, my voice soft.

"Because you're usually the one listening to me. I wanted to hear your story, too," she replied.

"Oh, I understand," I responded.

Countless thoughts lay hidden within me, but I realized everyone carried their own unspoken, concealed thoughts. These were battles I could conquer on my own.

In that moment, a tender sensation graced my hair. Something was touching me. Intrigued, I glanced up and discovered her petite hand caressing my head. Her delicate touch moved back and forth, soothingly stroking my hair. As she did, I listened intently to the sound of her voice.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Hmm... Good boy, good boy," she replied.

"What do you mean?" I inquired, curious.

"Isn't this is what an older sister does?" she pondered.

"We're the same age, you know," I pointed out.

"Oh, right," she acknowledged.

We continued our conversation, and memories of our past discussions resurfaced. A smile formed on my lips as I gently closed my eyes.

A rush of childhood memories came flooding back to me. I recalled my mother saying, “Keiichi, you’re already in first grade, so you’re like a big brother, right? Since Mom can’t come home due to work, please unlock the door, turn on the lights, and wait at home when you return from the daycare center. If Akane cries, give her a snack. You can do it because you’re her big brother.”

My response to my mother’s expectations was always a resolute yes. Deep down, I wanted to utter no but couldn’t. It became a minor trauma nestled within me. Well, perhaps it wasn’t truly traumatic. I felt a sense of fulfillment in being relied upon, yet there were moments when I longed to reach out for help. However, I kept those feelings to myself, never sharing them with anyone.

My grandmother was the only person who ever praised me for being a good and gentle child. I could vividly recall the touch of her wrinkled hand as it lovingly stroked my head.

As Saki’s tender touches reached me, a wave of nostalgia washed over me, reminiscent of my grandma’s gentle caresses. It were as if Saki’s actions were unraveling the knots within my soul and loosening my guarded heart.

Behind my closed eyelids, I noticed that one of the lights had dimmed. Startled, I opened my eyes to find Saki right beside me. I couldn’t help but exclaim, “Ah!” Her hand quickly retreated, and she appeared flustered.

If it embarrassed her to the point of blushing, she shouldn’t have initiated it in the first place. I was sure my own face was turning red as well. Nevertheless, I felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude. Thanks to Saki, my heart felt revitalized and refreshed.

“Thank you, Saki,” I expressed my gratitude.

“If you ever want to talk, just let me know,” she offered.

“Because that’s what an older sister does?” I asked.

“Yes,” she replied.

“But you don’t really look like an older sister,” I remarked, trying to lighten the atmosphere.

We shared a laugh, breaking through the initial awkwardness. I glanced in the direction of the big window and noticed the light had gone out. In fact, all the lights in the dormitory, which resembled a house from the outside, had been extinguished. The surroundings were enveloped in complete darkness.

“Huh?” I exclaimed, caught off guard by the sudden darkness.

“High school students have lights out at eleven, so it seems they’ve turned off,” Saki explained.

“Eleven o’clock?” I was taken aback and quickly glanced at the clock.

Wow, I hadn’t realized it was already eleven o’clock. How long had I been lost in thought while Saki stroked my hair?

Disappointed with my obliviousness, I slumped my shoulders and said, “I should head home,” as I stood up.

“Okay,” Saki agreed, rising to her feet as well.

Saki walked alongside me as we finished putting on our shoes in front of the shoebox. When we stood side by side again, I realized she was not much taller than me. Looking up at me, Saki expressed her gratitude, saying, “Keiichi, thank you for today.”

“No, thank you,” I replied sincerely.

“You know, today was the first time I brought a friend here.”

The word “friend” pricked my heart like a needle.

“I had fun,” she continued.

“Yeah, me too,” I responded, feeling a sense of fulfillment despite the fleeting nature of our time together. Being by Saki’s side felt incredibly comfortable.

“Yeah,” I murmured, lost in my thoughts.

“Well then, see you,” Saki said, attempting to leave the entrance. However, she followed me with a flashlight in her hand.

“What?” I turned around and asked curiously.

“Shall I walk you home?” she offered.

“No way. I’m not in the habit of being escorted by a girl,” I retorted, trying to dismiss her concern.

“You’ll definitely get lost in the woods,” she insisted.

“I’ll manage,” I asserted.

“No, you won’t.”

“Saki...”

“Oh, right. I have to go get my umbrella,” she remembered, diverting the conversation.

Her last line was delivered so stiffly that I couldn’t help but burst into laughter. Saki definitely came across as a model student. She was the kind of person who couldn’t simply ignore a troubled child. In Saki’s eyes, I’d been labeled as a “troubled child,” like some kind of class representative for all misfits.

I’m in deep trouble. I never imagined finding myself being escorted by a girl.

Are you sure it’s alright? It’s lights out, right?” I inquired, glancing at the dormitory engulfed in darkness, resembling a house with all its lights turned off.

There was no longer any source of light to illuminate the area. When the lights were gone, the world took on a blue hue. The only glimmers of light were the flashlight in Saki’s possession and the pale blue moon glowing above.

“It’s fine. I’m trusted,” she reassured me.

“Trusted?”

“By Sasaki-sensei. She’s my supervisor and explicitly told me not to have anyone come to check on me so I can focus on my artwork until morning.”

“I see,” I responded, comprehending the situation.

“Therefore, even if it’s past lights out, nobody will come to inspect us. We’re in the clear,” she declared with confidence.

I couldn’t help but chuckle at her self-assuredness.

“That’s quite impressive,” I playfully teased her like a mischievous child.

“I know,” she responded, equally confident. Her response only made me laugh harder.

“That’s why I’ll walk you to the spring. I brought you here without asking, so let me at least do this much. Otherwise, I won’t be able to sleep from worrying,” Saki insisted, her concern evident in her words.

Just go to sleep, I thought, but deep down, I knew if tried to go home alone, she would follow me in secret.

“Okay, let’s go to the spring,” I conceded, realizing arguing was futile.

Saki answered with a simple “Yeah,” and we embarked on our journey together. Walking alongside Saki, the distance to the spring felt much shorter, perhaps because we didn’t pass by any scenic spots along the way.

We found ourselves in a familiar area, nearing the spring. Amid the forest, I couldn’t help but worry if it was right for her to accompany me this far.

“Who needs an umbrella anyway? We can get one tomorrow, right?” I silently regretted not suggesting this earlier. However, as I glanced at Saki walking by my side, she seemed happy.

“Thanks, Saki,” I expressed my gratitude, the cool breeze brushing against my skin.

“What’s wrong? Suddenly thanking me?” she asked.

“No, I was just thinking that I wouldn’t have been able to do it alone,” I said, realizing her support throughout the night.

Various thoughts raced through my mind, but in the end, I chose to trust Saki’s kindness. Maybe it was the sight of her joyful expression that influenced my decision.

The path leading to the spring was dimly lit and had treacherous slopes. If I were alone, I doubt I would have been able to navigate it safely. I felt a sense of relief knowing Saki was with me.

We arrived back at the spring, greeted by a serene atmosphere. The surroundings were enveloped in silence, interrupted only by occasional

whispers of leaves dancing in the wind. The chorus of cicadas, once echoing through the summer mountains, had now faded away, leaving behind undisturbed tranquility.

A faint image of the full blue moon adorned the surface of the spring, a reflection of the nocturnal scenery. As I gazed quietly at the night sky, a moon of the same deep blue hue hung directly above the spring, mirroring the one in Saki's painting.

Without wanting to interrupt my contemplation, Saki stepped away, heading toward where the umbrella had been left by the spring. I couldn't help but feel apologetic for the trouble I was causing her. As I observed her figure receding, an unfamiliar sensation tugged at my heart. We had only just met, yet there was an unexplainable ache within me.

Why was this happening? Why did being around her stir up such emotions? I questioned myself, struggling to fully comprehend the unfolding feelings.

Saki retrieved the umbrella and returned to my side, breaking through the perplexity that had gripped me. As she uttered, "Sorry to keep you waiting," a gentle warmth embraced my heart. The sensation was incomparable, unlike anything I had experienced before.

"I'm home," she said, and in that moment, I realized that being in her presence felt like finding a place I truly belonged. Was it our shared age? Our common interests? The answers eluded me, leaving me puzzled and uncertain about the depths of my emotions.

"Shall we head home?" she asked, and at that instant, a sense of unease washed over me. It seemed that I had yet to fully grasp the complexities of the emotions blossoming within me, leaving me in a state of confusion.

"Shall we head back?" Saki's voice lacked its usual energy, and it was then that I noticed her trembling brown eyes, brimming with sadness.

"What's wrong?" I asked, concern evident in my voice. Saki, who had returned from the spring, seemed visibly distressed.

"It's nothing," she replied, forcing a smile and shaking her head. But it was clear that her smile was not genuine, and something weighed heavily on her. It

was as if she had left a part of herself behind at the spring, and only her empty shell remained.

“Saki?” I approached her, realizing that it wasn’t just my imagination. She was truly feeling down, and it was reflected in her expression.

Unable to find the right words, I reassured her, “If it’s alright with you, I’m here to listen. Whatever you have to say, I’ll be here for you.”

“Really... it’s nothing,” she replied weakly, attempting to be strong like I often did. In that moment, I realized how similar we were, both trying to bear our burdens alone.

I struggled to find the right words of comfort for Saki, who seemed different from her usual self. As I heard a faint rustling from Saki’s hand, my gaze lowered to discover a small white piece of paper. It was the note she had written earlier and tucked under the umbrella before we left the spring. Was this the reason for her melancholy?

My intuition, which was usually bad, sprang to life. I wanted to be there for Saki without any preconceived notions.

“I’m here until the blue moon ends.” Her words echoed in my mind. Her voice had carried a sense of loneliness as if a story she had been reading had abruptly come to an end.

What significance did the white paper under the umbrella hold? Was she waiting for someone in this very place? Was that white paper intended for someone other than Saki?

“That’s... a letter?” I managed to utter, my voice strained and barely recognizable.

Saki’s delicate shoulders quivered as she nodded, her gaze meeting mine. “Yeah... that’s right.”

A searing pain gripped my chest. At that moment, I realized that Saki’s trembling eyes, strained voice, and presence at the spring were not because of me. Taking a deep breath to steady myself, I mustered the courage to ask, “Who are you waiting for?”

My curiosity about her deepened, intertwined with an inexplicable desire to remain by her side indefinitely. Then, I recognized the dormant emotions within me for what they truly were... love.

“Isn’t this what an older sister does?”

“I’m... a child of the Hinata Dormitory,” she said.

“Hmm... Good boy, good boy.”

A quiet silence filled the air on a summer night with just the two of us. Saki took a small breath and looked at me.

“I’m waiting for... my first love,” she said, revealing her answer.

The feelings that lay dormant inside me were surely... love. I was in love with her.

CHAPTER 3

The town lay shrouded in a slumbering hush as I strolled along a street adorned with shuttered storefronts. It wasn't until I had ventured some distance that the soft glow of orange streetlights above caught my attention.

A strange sensation gripped me as if my body and mind were disconnected. Though my feet carried me toward Grandma's house, my thoughts remained ensnared within the forest.

"I'm waiting for my first love." Her words reverberated within me, refusing to fade away.

In that moment, I had been so overwhelmed by her revelation that words had eluded me. An unspoken heaviness lingered between us, yet I remained oblivious to its weight.

"I'm sorry! It suddenly got dark, didn't it?" Being the first to perceive the mood, she tried to change it.

She tried to reassure me by speaking brightly and flashing a smile.

"Wow! Keiichi-kun, you've got that gloomy look too. Oh no, I feel really bad about it."

"..."

"Keiichi-kun, this isn't like you at all. Snap out of it, and let's head back home."

She waved her small hand back and forth in front of my face, trying to catch my attention. Slowly, my focus shifted toward her as her rhythmic hand movements drew me in.

"Oh... sorry."

Finally, my consciousness found its voice.

She had misunderstood the reason behind my silence and thought it was her fault. But that wasn't right.

My gaze fell upon her right hand, where the letter was tucked away. If her note was still there, it meant the person she had been waiting for hadn't come to the spring. She was putting on a brave face for my sake, but deep inside, she must have been hurt.

Perhaps Saki had been waiting for that man for a long time, much longer than she had been waiting for me at the spring.

She sat alone by the edge of the spring, using the umbrella to scoop up the stars, and she seemed incredibly happy and content... probably because she was waiting for a man I didn't know.

A small sigh escaped my lips. My eyes fixed on the numbers written on the white paper she held, and I couldn't help but gasp. Two dashes separated the digits, a distinctive pattern that undoubtedly formed a phone number.

The number didn't begin with a mobile phone code; instead, it matched the area code for Grandma's town. It must have been the phone number for her dormitory, where she resided.

Even as she played with me, her newfound friend, she eagerly anticipated a call from that person.

A sharp pain struck my heart.

"Keiichi, are you alright?" Saki's concerned face came into view, her large brown eyes were as endearing as a cat's, causing my forced smile to become self-deprecating.

"I'm fine. I was just lost in my thoughts."

"If you say so... I'm sorry if I did anything wrong."

"Saki, there's no need for you to apologize for anything."

"Alright."

"Shall we head back? It's getting late, and it's not good to stay out too long."

"Okay."

And with that, we went our separate ways. Saki climbed up the mountain and waved goodbye from the top. I raised my hand and bid her farewell by the

spring. I waited until her figure disappeared into the woods before starting my journey back.

“I’m home.”

The sliding door chimed as I entered.

I had returned to Grandma’s house. It was as quiet as ever, likely because everyone had already gone to bed.

I walked along the veranda, making no noise, and settled in the same spot as yesterday. The summer breeze brushed against my skin, its warmth contrasting with the cool night wind in Tokyo. But thanks to the clear air, it felt pleasantly refreshing.

In the distance, the gentle sound of a stream flowing downstream reached my ears. Sitting on the veranda, I tilted my head back and gazed up at the night sky. A magnificent full blue moon hung in the deep blue expanse, partially obscured by a wispy white clouds.

How beautiful...

It occurred to me that I had been in this same position, looking up at the moon, just yesterday. Thoughts of Saki flooded my mind as I sat here.

Lost in contemplation, I watched the cloud shift, revealing the moon’s radiant face. The large blue full moon proudly displayed its brilliance, casting an unexpected brightness. The bundled blue light extended straight toward me, making me exclaim, “Ah!”

As the blue light entered my body through my open mouth, it traveled to the center of my being. With a resounding burst, the core of blue light shattered, spreading throughout my entire being. The blue light bathed me in its gentle glow, illuminating everything within. My heart lamented, tormented by the inability to fully comprehend the present circumstances.

Today, I came to the realization that the dormant feelings within me were indeed my love for Saki. It was an undeniable truth. Even now, my heart burns passionately at the mere thought of her. Simultaneously, I had learned that Saki had someone she loved.

Before I could confess my feelings, she had slipped from my grasp. Nevertheless, my love for her remained unwavering...

But she—

A familiar and soothing voice interrupted my thoughts as I grappled with the intricate web of emotions.

“Welcome back, Keiichi.”

“Grandma.”

I turned around to find Grandma standing behind me on the veranda. She had come to my side, just like yesterday. The serene aura that surrounded Grandma comforted my unsettled heart. It felt like the pieces of my fragmented heart were slowly coming back together. Once my heart was restored, I mustered the courage to ask, “Grandma, shouldn’t you be getting some rest?”

It was unusual for Grandma, who always retired early and woke up at the crack of dawn, to be awake at this hour. And now, she had been here on the veranda two nights in a row.

Was I talking to myself? Had I been too loud...?

“I had a hunch that you would come to visit tonight, Keiichi, so I stayed up waiting for you.” Grandma spoke tenderly as though she were beholding something precious.

Tonight?

Her words carried a hint of unease, as if she only appeared for nocturnal excursions.

“Grandma, I’ve been here since morning. I even bought croquettes and tofu. We ate together, remember?”

“Did we?”

“*Time for dinner,*” my mother’s voice had called out from inside the house.

As I walked along the veranda, I noticed the pale pink hues of the sunset clouds stretching across the western sky. A warm red glow bathed the roof and glass doors. I glanced at the flower bed, its blooms turning a deep shade of red,

before making my way to the living room. In Grandma's home, where dinner was typically served early, the evening meal was already laid out on the dining table. A large plate adorned the center, piled high with Nakamura-ya croquettes, the star of tonight's dinner. Grandma, Dad, Mom, Akane, and I gathered around the table, eagerly devouring the delectable treats. Despite there being thirty small croquettes, they disappeared in a blink of an eye.

"Big brother, you're eating too much."

"Oh, come on. I bought them, so it's fine. You, on the other hand, Akane, better don't overindulge, or you'll put on weight."

"That's mean. Grandma, big brother is being mean to me. It's the worst when your own brother bullies you and enjoys it."

"You..."

"What?"

"Alright, alright. No fighting. Akane, you can have some of Grandma's croquettes."

"Wait! No need! I bought these croquettes for you, Grandma... Here, Akane."

I reluctantly tossed the remaining croquettes onto Akane's plate, and she wasted no time devouring them. Grandma, observing our banter, smiled warmly from her seat next to Akane.

"What's the matter, Grandma?" I inquired.

"Keiichi, you're still such a good big brother. Even as you grow older, you continue to be a kind and caring sibling," Grandma remarked, her eyes narrowing in a gentle smile.

"No, Grandma, I'm always getting bullied," Akane protested.

"You..."

This exchange had taken place just a few hours ago. However, Grandma seemed to have already forgotten about dinner, the conversation between Akane, me, and herself. Did her memory worsen at night? She appeared more lucid during the morning and afternoon hours.

Under the moonlight, Grandma's countenance appeared slightly younger than usual. Even her steps seem to have gained a spring in the evening hours.

Oh, well. I decided not to dwell too much on it. *Whether her memory fades or not, she is still Grandma, a cherished presence in our lives.*

"Keiichi, are you having trouble sleeping?"

Well, you see, she showed concern for me even today. Her warmth never changed.

"Yeah, I feel like staying out in the breeze a little longer."

"There are moments like that, huh? Is it alright if I keep you company?"

"Of course."

With that, Granny settled down beside me. Together, we gazed up at the night sky.

"It's blue again tonight," she remarked.

The blue full moon reflected in Granny's eyes. The flowers in the garden, the watering can, and the silver handwashing area were all bathed in blue. *Wait, the watering can...?*

As I looked up at the night sky, the moonlight lost brilliance, and only a faint glow remained.

"Today is the second day, so only two more days are left..." Granny mused, her eyes fixed on the full moon.

Curiosity piqued, I tilted my head and silently studied Granny's face.

"Have I not told you this story?" Granny began.

"No."

I leaned in, eager to hear Granny's tale.

"A blue moon is when a full moon appears twice in one month, right?"

"Yeah."

"The moon gradually waxes, reaches fullness, and then wanes. So, a full moon that possesses the power of a blue moon only lasts for four days during the

spring tides.”

“Four days...?”

“That’s correct. By the fifth day, the moon starts to wane and no longer appears full. It ceases to be a blue moon.”

After five days, the blue moon returns to being an ordinary moon.

“It only occurs every few years, so we must make sure to observe it closely.”

Granny murmured to herself, lost in thought. “Hmm...”

The lifespan of a blue moon is merely four days. Once those first four days of the month and the final four days at the end of the month have passed, the blue moon of that month is said to conclude. It may be several years before such a special full moon night graces us again.

Under the enchanting blue moonlight, everything took on a fantastical hue, appearing ephemeral to my eyes. I had a sense that the memories of this summer would hold a special place in my heart. With that thought in mind, I continued to gaze up at the night sky.

After some time, it felt like I had caught a glimpse of a lovely smile on the full moon. It was Saki’s smile, with eyes that slanted at the corners like a cat’s and a mouth that curled tightly upwards.

For me, Saki was the person who came to mind whenever I looked at the moon and stars. I could even recall her words to me: “Sometimes, I have this strong urge to express myself.”

Now I understood how Saki must have felt, because I was experiencing the same emotions. With Grandma by my side, accepting and forgiving everything, I felt the urge to share things I wouldn’t normally say.

“Grandma, do you know about Hinata Dormitory?”

“Hinata Dormitory?”

After pondering for a moment, Grandma’s face lit up with recognition. “Oh, the facility up on the mountain?”

“Yeah,” I replied.

Just earlier, I had spent a delightful time at Hinata Dormitory. We looked at pictures, drank tea, talked, and she even stroked my head...

Recalling those moments, my cheeks grew warm, and I felt embarrassed. I turned my face away, hoping Grandma wouldn't notice my flushed complexion.

"I made friends with a girl over there yesterday."

"I see."

"And I met her again today."

"Mmm."

The sensation of her hand gently caressing my head flooded back to me. It was a tender and soothing touch.

I remembered her clear voice calling my name and her large, expressive eyes framed by long lashes. Saki's eyes sparkled with beauty, devoid of any judgment, seemingly reflecting her true self.

"She's a beautiful girl, not just on the outside, but in her heart as well."

As I struggled to articulate my genuine feelings, my words stumbled awkwardly. Nevertheless, Grandma smiled warmly, and that eased my apprehension.

Then, I realized something. *Ah... everything about her is beautiful. That's why I fell in love with her.*

Yesterday, it was love at first sight for her appearance. And today, it was love for her heart.

The me of yesterday, the me of today, and even the me of the future would forever love her.

I'd wish I could always be by her side, but she had developed feelings for someone else. It stirred a profound and unfamiliar emotion within me. As someone inexperienced in love matters, I found navigating these uncharted waters challenging.

She... had found someone she liked. It tightened my chest, and the pain became unbearable.

“You’ve made friends with such an amazing girl,” my grandmother remarked.

“Yeah... I think so too.”

“Are you planning to hang out with her tomorrow?”

“That’s the plan.”

“I see. How about inviting her to my place next time?” my grandmother suggested.

“Really? Is that okay?”

I hadn’t even considered the possibility of bringing her over, fearing teasing from Akane and my mother. However, my grandmother’s words unexpectedly filled me with joy. If only my grandmother were the only one at home, I would gladly ask Saki to come over. The mere thought of it brought me immense happiness.

“Of course. Saki means a lot to you, doesn’t she, Keiichi?”

“Yeah.”

The suffocating feeling that had overwhelmed me moments ago started to fade. My grandmother’s kind words dissolved it away.

“Thank you, Grandma.”

“When your friend comes over, I’ll treat her to my homemade croquettes.”

“I’m really looking forward to it.”

My grandmother’s words resonated deeply with me. She referred to Saki not just as a friend or a lover but as an “important person.” I found that phrase to be a perfect encapsulation of my feelings toward Saki.

Saki is an “important person” to me. That sentiment remains unwavering, regardless of whom she may be thinking about. And now, I want to cherish my feelings for her, recognizing her significance in my life.

Saki... Her image flooded my mind. “Maybe it’s because I’m your big sister,” she would say with a playful smile. Her endearing expression lingered in my memory.

Suddenly, an alarm clock by my pillow blared, abruptly ending my slumber. Irritated, I reached under the covers and slammed my hand down to silence the noisy interruption. I reluctantly pried open my heavy eyelids, annoyed at the alarm I didn't even remember setting.

"This has to be Akane's doing," I grumbled. "Can't I just enjoy my summer vacation in peace? I'm definitely not a morning person."

The morning sun filtered through the large glass door, casting a bright glow across the veranda. The sunlight was so intense, almost blinding. *Should I go back to sleep?* But just as that thought crossed my mind, the second alarm clock crackled to life, only to get intercepted by a resounding *bam!* Startled, I quickly reached out to turn it off. *Damn it, Akane...*

"Alright, you're up," a voice called out as I struggled with the alarm clock. Groggy, I sat on top of the futon and turned toward the sound. Akane opened the glass door to the veranda slightly and poked her head out. "Hey, you! You can't just put your alarm clock there without permission."

I hadn't noticed it last night, even though it was deliberately placed by my pillow. Plus, I had no idea how to turn off the consecutive alarms, so going back to sleep wasn't an option. It must have been my sister's plan.

"But you never wake up, brother."

"When the time comes, I'll wake up."

"No way. You never wake up on time. Yesterday was just a fluke, but you were planning to sleep in starting today, didn't you?"

That's right.

"Brother, where were you until late yesterday? Mom mentioned that she wanted to talk to you about something. You're always out playing, day and night. Let's have breakfast together," she said, her tone a mix of curiosity and concern.

Yesterday's lunch was Akane's treat, but I didn't mention it, not wanting the conversation to drag on.

“So, about the alarm clock...?” I inquired.

“That’s right. If you’re awake, come to the kitchen quickly!”

With a hasty motion, I closed the door with a loud thud and swiftly made my way to the veranda. It was an old house, and I reminded myself not to run around too loudly. Finally, I got out of bed, ready to face the day.

“Huh, really...?” I froze upon hearing my mother’s words at the dining table. Her statement left me pondering my next course of action.

“What will you do?” she asked, her tone filled with uncertainty.

“What do you mean? Even if you ask me...” I replied, unsure of how to respond.

It turned out that my mother wanted to discuss her sudden return to Tokyo in two days. We had initially planned to spend a relaxing summer in Kyoto, but her work circumstances had unexpectedly changed.

“We’ll go back first, but if you want to stay, you can. If you feel up to it, you can come back alone. You can handle it, right?” she suggested.

“I can manage, but...” I trailed off, contemplating the idea of returning to Tokyo alone. It seemed simple enough. I just needed to take the bus from Grandma’s house to Kyoto Station, pass through the JR ticket gate, proceed to the shinkansen platform, and board the train to Tokyo. That’s all it would take.

From there, my familiar everyday life would be waiting for me.

“It would be best if we all went back together,” said my mother while gazing at Grandma’s petite figure as she worked in the garden.

“What about Grandma? Won’t she come back with us?” I inquired.

“Grandma doesn’t want to,” my mother explained. “She said she was born in this town and has always wished to stay here. Her friends are nearby and her other relatives are here too, so she’ll be fine...”

My mother exhaled deeply, her gaze fixed on Grandma. She wore a troubled and melancholic expression as if she could sense the thoughts swirling in my mind.

Grandma held the hose I had prepared the day before and gently watered the flowers in an arc shape. Drenched in water, the flowers swayed their delicate petals and appeared joyous. In the clear sky, a small rainbow emerged along with the arching water.

Grandma beamed with happiness amidst the vibrant, seven-colored scene. Observing her and Mom, I found myself caught between their conflicting emotions. Understanding both their perspectives, I struggled to determine the right course of action as their child. It was a difficult decision to make.

I pondered the situation, uncertain what I should do. I didn't want Mom to carry a worried expression, but I also didn't want to take away Grandma's joyful smile.

"Keiichi, think about what you're going to do," Mom said while doing the dishes.

"Okay," I replied, finishing the breakfast on my plate.

From the kitchen, I heard the clinking of ceramics and the sound of running water. Whenever Mom did chores, she asked about my and Akane's activities.

"Where are you planning to go today?"

"How's soccer going?"

"Have you finished your homework?"

"Do you have a girlfriend?"

I understood it was her way of staying connected in the midst of her busy life; however, I found it difficult to answer those mundane questions sincerely, often brushing them off casually while continuing to eat. It had become routine. That's why the current silence maintained by Mom felt heavy with a tinge of sadness.

"It's okay... Mom," I softly called to her back.

"Huh?" she responded, taken aback.

"The food was delicious. Thank you."

I quickly finished my breakfast, stood without looking at Mom's face, slipped on the black slippers on the veranda, and positioned myself next to Grandma.

"Granny, let me take over watering the plants."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely."

I'm sorry, Mom.

Though saying "It's going to be okay" without a concrete solution may be a mere hollow comfort, I still wanted to say it somehow.

As I directed a larger arc of water into the clear sky, a rainbow painted with seven vibrant colors stretched across the horizon. I had done it too.

"Keiichi, look. There's a big rainbow," Grandma pointed out.

"You're right," I acknowledged, captivated by the sight.

Unaware of Mom observing us from the kitchen, I continued watering.

A new day begins today.

After watering the plants, I returned to my room. Coming to the countryside was enjoyable, but I couldn't ignore the nagging feeling of having an abundance of idle time. But if I mentioned it to my mother, she would likely respond with a stern "Study!" So, I decided not to bring it up. *What should I do now?*

As I glanced around my room, my eyes fell upon my smartphone, which I had stashed in my bag and hadn't checked since yesterday morning. It was hard to believe that I couldn't live without such devices in Tokyo. With that thought in mind, I checked the screen. There were several notifications in red on the app icons. Even the Line app, represented by a green speech bubble, had a small red circle in the upper right corner. Someone had sent me a message.

Curiosity piqued, I tapped on the Line app to open it. There were notifications from my soccer friends and an invitation to hang out from a classmate. And finally... there was a peculiar sticker that caught my attention. It was from my best friend, Yuuya.

The stamp depicted a bespectacled man with a 7:3 parted hairstyle, leaning on a desk, interlocking his hands, and wearing a frown as if ready to lecture me. What was this all about? Had I upset Yuuya somehow? There was no accompanying message, but beneath the stamp, there was a missed call notification. Hesitant but intrigued, I decided to return the call.

After I listened to the automated message a few times, Yuuya finally answered, his voice somewhat subdued.

“Yuuya? It’s Keiichi.”

“Yeah, what’s up?”

“What’s up? You called me yesterday, didn’t you?”

He still seemed irritated. It was unusual for Yuuya to display such anger toward me, leaving me slightly unsettled.

“I didn’t notice yesterday. What’s wrong?” I inquired, hoping for an explanation.

Yuuya responded nonchalantly, “Yesterday... that was a follow-up call. I was about to ask you what the hell were you thinking!”

“Huh?” I couldn’t help but let out a sound of surprise from my throat.

“Yesterday, because of that call, I ended up having a fight with Sakura.”

“Because of me?” I questioned, puzzled.

Why? Did I do something? I have no recollection of it at all. “Did I do something?” I asked sincerely, hoping for clarity.

Yuuya’s response came in a low voice. “Yesterday, you rejected the girl Sakura introduced to you just like that, didn’t you?”

Th-that’s...

During the phone call yesterday, Sakura mentioned that her friend liked me. But I dismissed her without even meeting her.

It was a significant moment for Sakura and her friend, yet I had prioritized my own emotions and ended the conversation abruptly. I should have handled it

more thoughtfully. I should have stayed on the phone longer. If I had, perhaps Yuuya and Sakura wouldn't have ended up in a fight...

Somehow, I had messed up... I scratched my temple, feeling remorseful, and said, "Yeah. Sorry about that."

"Well, you're always like that. Even if someone confesses to you, you reject them right away. You don't seem to like any women at all," Yuuya grumbled.

I responded to him, "It can't be helped. ...I just can't fall in love."

"Then who would be good enough for you?"

"..."

"What? I can't hear you."

"I haven't said anything yet."

"Just say it."

"Actually... I didn't feel like meeting her because I found someone I like."

"What?"

Yesterday, I informed Sakura that I was interested in someone, but she hadn't shared that information with Yuuya. I recalled Sakura's words during the phone call: "I didn't say you could spill everything." It was probably she showing that same consideration for me, judging that it would be better for Yuuya not to know, as he tended to speak his mind without hesitation. She was a thoughtful girl.

"Hey, Keiichi," Yuuya prodded me while I was lost in thought.

"Uh, yeah. Sorry," I stammered, flustered.

"What's wrong all of a sudden? Who is it, by the way?"

"It's someone you don't know."

"Is it a girl from Kyoto?"

"...Yeah."

Exactly a year ago, a flustered Yuuya with a bright red face had declared, "*I've found someone I like.*" The reason behind his declaration was that he had fallen

head over heels for Sakura, who had just started working as a part-timer at our usual family restaurant. Unable to engage with a girl he didn't know, Yuuya had frozen at our table. So, I took the initiative and spoke to Sakura on his behalf, saying, *"Can we have three glasses of water for this guy?"*

"Three glasses?"

"He seems really thirsty."

We both chuckled, reminiscing about that amusing incident.

And that was the beginning. We started frequenting the family restaurant, making sure Sakura remembered our faces. However, Yuuya still struggled to utter a word whenever Sakura spoke to him. So, I continued to act as his intermediary, conveying his feelings to Sakura. Over time, Yuuya began to respond, and they found laughter and closeness in each other's company. When we eventually invited everyone to the beach, Yuuya and Sakura became closer and started dating.

When I congratulated them, Yuuya turned away and replied with a simple *"Yeah."* Then, he muttered a quiet *"Thanks"* before saying, *"It's your turn next, Keiichi."*

"Me?" I responded, taken aback.

"Yeah. If you find someone you like, I'll support you with all my heart. Leave everything to me."

Initially, I felt hesitant about relying on him in such a way, but I was genuinely touched by my best friend's sentiment. So, I replied, *"Okay, I'll count on you."*

In return for Yuuya and Sakura's support, they often brought up the topic of my love life, but I always brushed it off. This phone call arrived just as I had declared, *"You don't have to support me anymore. I'll find someone I like on my own."*

I had made up my mind from the start. When I found someone I liked, I planned on sharing it with Yuuya. I hadn't anticipated feeling so embarrassed, but when I confessed that I liked her, Yuuya's response caught me off guard.

"Have you gone on a date?"

“A date?” I laughed, unable to imagine what kind of date he was referring to.

“What are you laughing at? Hurry up and make a date. If you just sit there daydreaming, someone else will take her away,” Yuuya urged, his words lighthearted but carrying a deeper meaning.

“Is that okay?” he probed further, digging into the depths of my emotions.

“Of course not,” I replied firmly.

The mere thought of Saki smiling at someone else or walking alongside another man ignited anger within me. I despised the idea. I believed that I should be the one by her side. However, she had someone she liked. That reality halted my feelings. I had resolved to honor my own emotions, but what about Saki’s feelings? I was at a loss for what to do.

“Hey, Yuuya... If there was someone that Sakura liked before you guys started dating, what would you do?” I asked, seeking his guidance. Yuuya was my senior in matters of love.

“I would take her,” Yuuya responded straightforwardly. “Because I know I can make Sakura happy,” he added, exuding confidence. I found his response admirable.

He turned the question back on me. “Keiichi, you would do the same, right?”

“Yeah,” I replied. If my dream became reality and Saki reciprocated my feelings, I would do everything within my power to make her happy. I wanted to protect her smile forever.

“What’s wrong? Are you confused? Oh, does she have a boyfriend or something?” Yuuya inquired.

“Boyfriend... Not to my knowledge. She mentioned waiting for her ‘first love,’” I explained, uncertain about who that might be.

“First love...” Yuuya sighed, his voice tinged with longing.

“When was your first love?” he asked.

“Me? It was probably back in kindergarten,” I replied, reminiscing about my crush on the Sunflower Group’s homeroom teacher.

“Right? First love is a story from years ago. You should show her that real men are much better than living in a fairy tale dream,” Yuuya advised.

Fairy tale... dream?

Yuuya’s words swirled in my head, and then connected.

Her world seemed like a cut-out, a serene blue world. It was a comforting place where time appeared to stand still. Could it be that Saki was freezing time in that realm? Was she forever waiting for her first love while time ceased to tick away? Would Saki continue to stand by the spring where no one came? That wasn’t what I wanted. I yearned to be with Saki, to share a life with her.

“Yeah... I’ll ask her out on a date,” I declared, a newfound determination welling up within me.

“You’re good at observing the world around you, but you’re clueless about yourself,” Yuuya remarked, hinting at my obliviousness to my own feelings. Yuuya laughed out loud and then said seriously, “Well, don’t hesitate. You don’t have much time.”

“Yeah.”

“Good luck.” Yuuya’s encouraging words resonated in my ears, filling me with determination.

“Thanks.” I hung up and rushed out of the room.

Bursting into the next room, I called out to Granny with excitement.

“Granny, tell me about the town of Kyoto.”

Surprised by my urgency, Granny asked, “What’s the matter? Why are you in such a rush?”

“I want to know about the town of Kyoto. Any recommended places?”

“Okay, okay. Sit down for now.” Granny settled me down, ready to share her knowledge.

As Granny began to tell me stories about Kyoto, Yuuya’s voice echoed in my head, reminding me not to hesitate and to give it my all.

Is this the place I'm looking for?

Filled with determination, I had decided to explore the area myself. While Granny had described Kyoto in great detail during the day, certain aspects could only be fully understood by experiencing them firsthand.

"Let's see, what can I recommend from Arashiyama... First, there's its symbol, Togetsukyō Bridge, right? And then there's Hōrin-ji Temple, famous for its Jūsan Mairi prayer, and Tenryū-ji Temple, a World Heritage site in the heart of Arashiyama."

Granny continued, *"Be sure to check out the cloud dragon painting on the ceiling of the hatto. The black and white dragon is drawn in a way that it seems to be staring at you from any angle. And if you walk a little further, you can enjoy the tofu dish of Sagano at Shoraian."*

As Granny spoke, I diligently took notes, but realized I would only be able to recognize the places if I visited them beforehand. Still, Granny seemed delighted to share her knowledge, speaking with a clear voice.

"And then, the towering bamboo grove is also lovely. If you follow the road, there's the famous Nonomiya Shrine for matchmaking. The area is quiet, so you can relax there, don't you think?"

Granny's stories were always soothing and resonated deep within me. Even if I didn't fully understand the details, I wanted to listen to her stories for as long as possible. However, upon a crucial realization, I interrupted the flow of her narrative.

"Granny, are the places open at night too?"

"At night?" Granny seemed puzzled by my question.

We only met on nights with a full moon. It was because Saki longed for the blue moon. When the blue moon glowed, she came to the spring. To meet her without any special arrangements, I had to go to the spring on a night with a blue moon.

The town of Arashiyama at night, which I saw two or three nights ago, had its shutters down and appeared desolate. Temples and shrines were closed, and

hardly any people were on the streets. At nighttime, Arashiyama's ambiance transformed into the serene and elegant atmosphere Kyoto was known for. There were only a few open shops, such as restaurants and convenience stores, with Japanese-style entrances. I couldn't help but wonder if the places Grandma had told me about were also closed.

"You're going at night? If so, you should have told me from the beginning," Grandma said, crossing her arms and pondering. As expected, it seemed like the town of Arashiyama closed its curtains at night.

After contemplating for a while, Grandma exclaimed, *"Ah, I remembered something."*

Curious, I asked, *"What is it?"*

She nodded and replied, *"It seems that something new has been recently built. A friend who lives nearby went to see it and couldn't stop raving about it. It's beautiful even during the day, but it lights up from the inside at night, creating a fantastic spectacle. Everyone who has seen it says it's incredibly stunning and that you should go check it out. Why don't you go take a look?"*

Grandma mentioned that she hadn't seen the new place yet, so I decided to say, *"I'll go take a picture and come back,"* before leaving the house.

And now, here I was, standing at that very place.

Grandma had informed me that the place I sought was inside Arashiyama Station, which was on the Arashiyama Line of the Keifuku Electric Railroad in Kyoto. The Keifuku Electric Railroad is a tram system that runs through the town of Kyoto. The starting point of the Arashiyama main line is Arashiyama Station, which terminates at Shijō-Ōmiya Station. The locals affectionately refer to this train as "Randen."

I made my way to Arashiyama Station on the Keifuku Electric Railroad. Upon arrival, I noticed no ticket gates on the premises, and the station area resembled an open space rather than a traditional station. It had more of a plaza-like atmosphere. To the left, I could see the tracks, and there was a quaint, retro-looking train with just one car parked there. On the right, poles towering above me covered the area.

This was it — the place Grandma had described. I recognized it immediately.

With anticipation, I approached the site. Colorful poles, reaching about two meters, stood at regular intervals along the path. The poles displayed colors unlike anything I had seen before. I couldn't help but be mesmerized by the exquisite acrylic poles, their beauty captivating me. It dawned on me — there was something concealed within these poles.

A realization washed over me, leaving me speechless with surprise. Inside the transparent acrylic poles were kimonos. I was in awe, forgetting to utter a single word.

Through a sign near the entrance, I discovered these kimonos were crafted from Kyoto-yuzen fabric, offering thirty-two patterns to admire. This place was aptly named the Kimono Forest, featuring six hundred poles adorned with Kyoto-yuzen fabric. It truly embodied the essence of Kyoto-yuzen, creating a world brimming with its charm.

Grandma's words echoed in my mind, "At night, the world is illuminated." A *forest of light*, I thought, envisioning the scene that would unfold. I couldn't help but wonder, *Which is more beautiful, the nearby natural bamboo forest or this enchanting artificial forest of light?*

As I touched the acrylic poles, my mind filled with memories of Grandma's words from a few hours ago. Deep in thought, I gazed into the distance, captivated by the scene unfolding before me.

The poles, filled with vibrant Kyoto-yuzen fabrics, exuded a remarkable beauty even in the daylight. However, it was at night when the true enchantment revealed itself. A gentle glow emanated from within, transforming the entire area into a realm of wonder.

I imagined it, a corridor adorned with illuminated kimonos — a sight of extraordinary beauty. I was overwhelmed by the desire to stroll through this magical Kimono Forest at night. I couldn't help but wonder if Saki, my companion, would share in the delight of witnessing the illuminated woods.

In my mind's eye, I recalled Saki's serene gaze, akin to someone who had beheld a nighttime panorama from atop a mountain. I could almost envision

her beautiful profile, her eyes reflecting the mesmerizing view. With each beat of my heart, anticipation and excitement surged within me.

“Furthermore, why don’t you take the Randen and explore the Sanjō or Shijō area? Many young people enjoy spending time there.”

The towns outside Arashiyama were unfamiliar territory for me, so I made sure to take careful notes of her suggestions.

Finally, nightfall arrived, and it was time to embark on my adventure.

“Alright, I’m off,” I whispered, opening the door cautiously. The sliding door closed behind me, its echoing sound blending with the tranquility of the residential neighborhood. The view from Grandma’s house on the hill remained as serene as ever. Under the deep blue sky, I set off toward the town.

Walking through the traditional streets, a delightful medley of sweet and savory aromas wafted through the air, teasing my senses. I tried to identify the source of the enticing smell — was it a simmered dish or perhaps oden? No, oden wasn’t typically eaten in summer.

As I contemplated the tantalizing fragrance, my stomach rumbled despite having just had dinner. I couldn’t help but chuckle at my sluggish metabolism, reminding myself to grab a bite to eat soon.

While playing a dinner guessing game and admiring the unchanging townscapes, I descended into town. The familiar nighttime ambiance welcomed me.

Tonight, the blue moon watched over me again. Thanks to it illuminating the path, I headed straight for the forest.

“It’s cold.”

Did it rain this morning? When I arrived at the forest, droplets on the leaves along the path wetted my arm. Upon closer inspection, the droplets shimmered like crystals under the blue moonlight. I wondered if the town’s rain had already dried up, but I hadn’t noticed.

Perhaps only the forest, where the sun doesn’t shine, retained these water droplets. A blue spring came into view as I walked through the damp forest.

Simultaneously, my eyes searched for her — the girl I fell in love with at first sight, who used to play by the spring with an umbrella. But today...

Huh? She's not here...

Saki was absent from her usual spot by the spring. I looked around but couldn't find her anywhere. Was she not coming today?

"Whoa!"

A voice startled me. As I turned in the direction of the sound, I found myself face to face with a smiling girl — Saki. My heart leaped at the sight of her, relieved that I could meet her again.

"What are you doing?" I managed to ask, trying to steady my trembling voice.

"Yesterday, you scared me. So, I wanted to surprise you today, and I was hiding over there," she explained, pointing toward the nearby fence.

"Did I surprise you?" Saki asked, her big round eyes fixated on me.

I couldn't help but notice her endearing habit of proudly sniffing. Though I found her words a bit childish, I kept it to myself. She resembled a tail-wagging puppy, eager for her master's approval, or a mischievous child attempting to surprise her father.

Observing Saki in that moment, I contemplated the idea to respond with a dramatic "Wow!", pretending to be shocked, and maybe even losing my balance. However, I merely entertained the idea and couldn't bring myself to act upon it.

"I was surprised, but... my reaction wasn't great, was it? I apologize for that," I admitted, feeling a tinge of regret.

In response, Saki vigorously shook her head side to side and reassured me, "No, not at all. I saw the expression on your face, usually so composed, as if you had been caught off guard in a surprise attack."

"Did I really make that face?" I questioned, a hint of disbelief in my voice.

"Yes, you absolutely did. That expression is etched in my memory," Saki replied, her shoulders shaking with laughter. While I didn't perceive myself as cool or caught off guard, I kept it to myself and embraced her infectious smile.

Though Saki typically portrayed herself as an exemplary student, she occasionally delighted in engaging in such childlike antics. Perhaps this was the true essence of Saki.

“How long were you hiding?” I asked, reaching out to pluck a leaf that had settled on top of her head.

“Just a little while,” she responded, her voice filled with playfulness.

As I presented her with the leaf, her eyes widened, and a blush of embarrassment colored her cheeks.

“Are you not going today?” I asked, curiosity piqued.

Usually, Saki would be seated by the spring, but today, she had chosen to be in the vicinity of the forest, where she could still catch a glimpse of the spring.

“Today, it rained all day, didn’t it? The area around the spring got quite muddy, so I couldn’t go there,” she explained.

“It rained all day?” I repeated, taken aback.

“Yes, it was a light rain on and off throughout the day. Perhaps you didn’t notice,” she suggested.

“I suppose... I didn’t realize,” I confessed.

While I had been taking a look around Arashiyama this afternoon, I had no recollection of any light rain. Had it started after I returned to Grandma’s house? I gazed up at the sky. The blue moon continued to hang in the dark expanse. The delicate clouds veiling the full moon added to the enchantment of the night.

I mustered the courage to speak as my gaze remained fixed on the moon.

“Saki, umm...”

“What is it?” she responded, her tone filled with curiosity.

“How long have you been waiting here... for him?”

It was a sudden and probing question, even though I was aware of that. But I couldn’t help but ask.

On the days when rain prevents her from reaching the spring, does she still wait for her first love in this forest where she can catch a glimpse of it?

In the dimly lit forest, I could hear rustling leaves and the occasional cicada, a soft symphony not too overwhelming. *In a place like this, all alone for such a long time?*

With such thoughts swirling in my mind, I couldn't resist asking.

"For six years," she replied.

Six years ago, she was just eleven, a sixth-grader.

"Have you been waiting for your first love all this time?" I inquired.

"Yes. Although he never came to see me," she revealed.

"Did you both promise to meet here?"

"No, there was no promise. I simply fell in love at first sight when I met him here. So, I've been hoping that if I stay here, I'll see him again."

Ah... As Yuuya mentioned, it was true. Saki had halted time for herself. She resided in a dreamlike realm akin to a fairy tale, consumed by love for six long years.

"Saki, would you like to go out?" I proposed.

"Huh?"

"Yesterday, you took me out and showed me around, remember? I had a great time, and I'd like to return the favor today."

"Return the favor?" Saki responded, looking at me intently.

I continued, undeterred by her surprise, "Let's also leave a letter for that person."

"But... I don't have a phone. I only have the number of the dormitory, so I can't go too far..." she hesitated.

As Saki's voice faded toward the end of her sentence, I realized her predicament.

"You don't have a phone?" I inquired, trying to comprehend.

“Hinata Dormitory doesn’t allow cell phones,” she explained with a tinge of resignation.

“I see. Then, just write down my number. Here, I’ll give it to you.”

I might have come across as forceful in my insistence.

“Wait, hold on...” Saki started to say, but before she could fully process her thoughts, she took out a piece of paper and a pen from her bag. She wrote down the number I provided. I took the paper from her, asking, “Can I borrow your pen too?”

“Y-yeah,” she stuttered, lending me her pen.

With the pen in hand, I added a word to the paper. Once finished, I return the pen to Saki and took the plastic umbrella she’d been holding. I walked toward the spring, ignoring Saki’s voice in the distance calling my name.

On the wooden board above the spring, I placed the transparent umbrella and slipped the note beneath it. It would catch someone’s attention immediately. This spot, basked in the brilliance of the blue moonlight — the perfect place to make our message visible.

“So, shall we go?” I asked Saki, who appeared bewildered upon returning from the spring.

Though I tried to maintain a calm exterior, deep down, I worried she’d refuse or find it bothersome, but I had something I wanted to share with her. I yearned to spend quality time together.

Perhaps my intense emotions reached her, as she smiled, seemingly resigned.

“It’s boring to stay here without you, right...? Okay. Let’s go,” she exclaimed, and I internally celebrated with a mental fist pump, as I ran through the forest with my muddy sneakers.

“Keiichi-kun, why are we running?” she asked.

“Hurry up! The night is coming to an end,” I urged.

The blue moon continued to watch over us.

“It’s been a while since I last came to the urban area,” Saki remarked as we left the forest and walked for a while.

“Is that so?”

“I think the last time was when I was ten. It was the final visit I made with my mother,” she reminisced.

It had already been seven years.

“Has it changed?” I inquired.

She looked around at the town and replied, “Yes, it has changed a lot.”

“I agree.”

Her voice held a gentle tone as she gazed at the familiar town with warm eyes.

I’m glad I brought her here. The city of Kyoto suited her better than waiting by the spring.

“There weren’t any buildings like this before, and even this old shop has a completely different atmosphere. It’s stylish and beautiful. I wonder if it was rebuilt...”

As she spoke, my eyes caught sight of a sign that read, “Welcome to Hannari, Kyoto.”

“Hannari...” I mused.

I remembered the first time I heard that word; I didn’t understand its meaning, so I asked my grandmother. Hannari was a Kansai dialect term, signifying elegance, brightness, and glamour.

Elegant, bright, and glamorous... that’s her. The word *hannari* fit her perfectly. She embodied elegance, possessed a radiant personality, and naturally exuded glamour.

I couldn’t help but envision Saki in a kimono. I was sure she would look stunning. When I thought of women in Kyoto, the immediate association was with kimonos. However, I realized that this perspective may have stemmed from being an outsider. With her fair skin and slender figure, Saki would indeed have been exceptionally beautiful in a kimono.

As I indulged in this mental image, my stomach growled loudly.

Is this a joke? Why now? I grumbled, annoyed by my sudden hunger.

Saki, sitting beside me, squinted her eyes and inquired, “Are you hungry?”

Was it so amusing that it made her want to cry? I wished I could vanish into thin air. Concealing my anxious feelings, I casually replied, “It seems so,” as if it were someone else’s problem.

In truth, I wasn’t overly hungry; it was simply my stomach making its presence known.

“There’s a delicious croquette shop nearby. Would you like to go?” I suggested.

“Croquettes? I love them. Let’s go!” she agreed.

We proceeded south along Arashiyama Street and turned left in front of Tenryū-ji Temple, where we found Nakamura-ya with its inviting brown sign. As I approached, the shopkeeper greeted us with a warm welcome.

“How many croquettes would you like, Saki?” I inquired.

“Just one,” she replied. I purchased three croquettes and handed one to Saki.

“Have you ever tried these croquettes before?” I asked.

“No, this is my first time on this street,” she responded.

“I see. This isn’t the main street, so I wouldn’t have noticed it either if my grandma hadn’t told me,” I said.

“They look delicious, don’t they?” Saki remarked, her eyes fixed on the freshly fried croquettes.

“They must be good, right?”

“I can’t wait. Let’s dig in,” Saki exclaimed before taking a bite.

“Ouch!”

“Oops! I forgot to warn you that they’re hot,” I apologized. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, it was a bit hot, but I’m fine. Although this croquette is really tasty. It might be the best one I’ve ever had.” Saki’s eyes sparkled with delight,

resembling those of a contented cat. I silently thanked Nakamura-ya for giving me the chance to witness Saki's adorable smile.

"Keiichi, your stomach is growling," Saki pointed out.

"Yeah, let's eat," I agreed.

Although the atmosphere was somewhat subdued, we continued walking south along the nocturnal streets of Arashiyama. All the shops were closed, and the only illumination came from the large orange streetlights above.

Occasionally, I found myself peering into vacant storefronts, pondering what kind of establishments they were. However, they often turned out to be high-end restaurants or inns, not the type of places that high school students like us would typically frequent.

I contemplated venturing into the city and taking the Arashiyama train, as recommended by my grandmother.

"Saki, this way," I beckoned, leading her down the main street and turning left.

Saki followed me, asking, "To Arashiyama?"

"Yeah, that's right."

I wanted to show Saki the Kimono Forest in Arashiyama Station. I envisioned the kimono-adorned corridor emitting a soft glow, transforming into a mesmerizing world known as the Forest of Light.

With that in mind, I stepped into the station, anticipating Saki's fascination with the vibrant patterns adorning the traditional Japanese fabrics.

Saki noticed that the train had already arrived as we reached the square, and promptly boarded. As the train whistle sounded, indicating its departure, she looked at me with a puzzled expression.

"Keiichi-kun, are you not getting on? The train's leaving."

Startled, I snapped back to reality. "Ah, yeah. I'm getting on."

I boarded the train just in time before the doors closed. Inside, we found ourselves in an empty carriage.

“It’s empty, isn’t it?” Saki commented, taking a seat beside me on the long bench.

“To tell you the truth, this is my first time riding the Arashiyama train,” Saki admitted, her voice sounding unfamiliar.

Meanwhile, I stared out the train window, searching for the picturesque scene of the Forest of Light created by the kimono corridor. But to my surprise, there was nothing. The square outside was devoid of the acrylic poles adorned with Kyoto-yuzen fabric that should have been present. It was simply an empty asphalt space.

Confusion clouded my mind. Why wasn’t the Forest of Light here? How could something visible during the day vanish at night? I couldn’t comprehend it.

“Keiichi-kun, what’s wrong?” Saki’s concerned voice brought me back to the present.

“Oh, no... It’s nothing,” I replied, trying to dismiss my perplexity.

Did I mistake the station? Or did I board from a different location? I pondered these questions as I observed the passing scenery but couldn’t find any answers.

The retro purple train carried us through the streets of Kyoto, and the view outside transformed from urban houses to the tranquility of nature. The vibrant colors of the scenery were muted by the darkness of the night, resembling an ink painting. The single-carriage train gracefully traversed this artistic landscape.

“Keiichi-kun, look at that,” Saki suddenly pointed at an advertisement hanging from the ceiling of the train.

I shifted my gaze and examined the poster. Curious words caught my attention.

“The Arashiyama Yokai Train,” Saki read out the large letters on the poster. Below the words, were numerous ghostly figures.

“Do you know about this train?” she inquired while I examined the poster.

“No, I don’t,” I replied truthfully, captivated by the detailed depictions of familiar ghosts such as the Nekomusume (Catgirl), Konaki-jiji (Crying Old

Man), and Ittan-momen (One Bolt of Cotton).

Upon closer inspection, I noticed that the ghosts in the poster were wearing wigs and makeup, and some even had masks. Their costumes appeared handcrafted, lending a sense of realism to their ghostly disguises. The gazes of these eerily realistic ghosts seemed to follow our every move.

“What could this be?” I murmured, listening intently to Saki’s voice. It seemed that during a specific period in late August, the Randentransformed into the Yokai Train, with *yokai* (supernatural creatures) aboard. As someone who usually only used the Hankyū Electric Railway, it was my first time on the Arashiyama Electric Railway, just like Saki.

I thought the only notable difference from the Hankyū Electric Railway was that this was a tram. However, the Arashiyama Electric Railway seemed to hold various seasonal events on the train. Saki stared anxiously at the posters advertising these events.

“Do you want to ride the Yokai Train?” I asked her, intrigued by her curiosity.

“No,” she shook her head. “I’m not good with horror.”

I couldn’t help but notice the flicker of interest in her eyes as she spoke.

“So...?” I urged her to continue, and she looked at me with surprise before a smile of relief spread across her face.

“So... I don’t really want to ride it, but I’m a little curious about what kind of train it is.”

“If I tried to convince you to come with me...?”

“Hmm... I might hesitate for a moment, but I might ride it, thinking it could be fun.”

Despite the potential fright, she seemed willing to give it a try. I wondered if this was what it felt like to enter a haunted house while being scared — an apprehensive excitement. Personally, I felt no fear.

“But there will be a yokai sitting next to you, right? That’s pretty scary, isn’t it?”

Seeing Saki's terrified expression, I couldn't help but smile. It would be amusing to see her react with a hundred faces. However, it would be a tremendous shock if she suddenly found herself on a train full of yokai after not being in town for seven years. That's why I thought it was best for her to simply admire the posters for now.

Again, I couldn't help but think I would like to ride this train with her someday.

"It says here that passengers can also dress up," I mentioned, hoping to pique her curiosity despite her fear.

Her eyes sparkled with interest. "Really?"

"And if you're recognized as a yokai, you get a yokai certification seal, and the fare is only fifty yen."

"That sounds like fun," she replied, her tone betraying a hint of excitement.

"Yeah, it does," I responded, and we shared a laugh. Our laughter brought us closer than I had expected. As the train swayed gently along the tracks, our shoulders would occasionally touch, and then we would separate. Each time, a small flame would ignite within me, causing my chest to tighten. I couldn't help but notice the warmth on my shoulder where Saki had touched me, drawing my attention to that spot.

I subtly adjusted my position, slightly moving away from her so she wouldn't hear my pounding heart.

"If you ride the Yokai Train, will you dress up as a yokai?" I asked, trying to divert attention from my racing heartbeat.

"Hmm, if I were a kid, maybe," she replied thoughtfully.

"You look like a cat girl, don't you?" I suggested playfully.

"Eh? I'd rather be Nurarihyon," she responded.

"What kind of yokai is that?"

"Don't you know? It appeared in *GeGeGe no Kitarō*," she explained.

"I've never seen it. What kind of yokai is it? Is it a girl?"

“It’s a short yokai with a big head,” she said.

“Oh, really?”

“Old man.”

“I’m an old man,” I quipped back.

Her remark was so amusing that I laughed until my stomach hurt.

The train eventually reached its final stop at Shijō-Ōmiya Station. We disembarked, transferred to the Hankyū Line at Ōmiya Station across the platform, and traveled two more stations to Kawaramachi Station.

Emerging from the station, we found ourselves surrounded by unfamiliar scenery — the bustling streets of Kyoto stretched out before us.

Um... was it this way? I hesitated, feeling slightly embarrassed to consult the notes I had scribbled down.

Suddenly, we noticed a corner bustling with people flowing like a wave. We turned left there and entered a street labeled Kiyamachi-dori, walking northward amid the crowd.

Yes, this should be it. Grandma said to walk along Kiyamachi-dori...

A shallow river flowed alongside Kiyamachi-dori, its water so clear that we could see the stones on the riverbed. This street exuded the ambiance of old Kyoto. Several small bridges crossed the river, and a myriad of shops crowded together beyond them. Couples were waiting their turn in front of shops where crowds had gathered.

Even though it was nighttime, the Shijō-dori was teeming with people. It was a stark contrast to the tranquil town of Arashiyama at night.

As we walked, my heart felt restless amidst the unfamiliar scenery and complex street layout. *Which way should we go on this street? To the right? To the left? Straight ahead?* The sea of people made it difficult to discern the corners — I couldn’t even see them clearly.

Is this okay?

I started feeling flustered, about to rush forward, when a soft voice called out, “Keiichi-kun, this is a cherry blossom tree.”

I turned toward the voice.

Saki had stopped and was gazing at a tree that stretched out over the river, devoid of any blossoms. Curious, I joined her, looking up at the sky. The young green leaves formed a vast canopy above our heads.

“Is this... a cherry blossom tree?” I asked as I walked a few steps closer to her, returning to her side. Without any flowers, it was difficult to determine.

“Yeah. It says Somei Yoshino here,” Saki pointed to a tag attached to the tree.

“Really?” I responded. “I wonder if it would be even more beautiful in spring?” I imagined the sound of cherry blossoms blooming in the sky, their pink petals gently falling like snowflakes around us. I had never really considered what it would be like if it were spring or autumn at that moment.

People hurried past us on either side, their footsteps blending into the night’s noise. It had become a habit of mine to unconsciously match the brisk pace of people, even back when I lived in Tokyo.

However, Saki didn’t get swept away by the current of people. She stopped and savored each view, cherishing the beauty of the scenery before her, etching it into her memory.

“But I also like cherry blossom leaves. They’re beautiful even without flowers, don’t you think?” Saki referred to them as *hazakura*.

So this is what they call hazakura...

“Maybe it’s because it’s nighttime. They look especially beautiful...” I murmured, my gaze fixed on the cherry blossom leaves. Her gentle smile in response caused my heart to tremble.

As a man, I knew I should take the lead. *I should navigate this date confidently and stylishly.* Yet, something nagged at my heart, as if embedded with a thorn, making it difficult to notice the subtle beauty of the town.

The noises of the night faded into darkness.

“*Hazakura*, you say?” I recalled wanting to continue the conversation and divert my attention from my pounding heart.

“Yeah. Didn’t you know?” she replied, surprised by my lack of knowledge.

“I’ve heard the term before, but I think this might be the first time I’ve actually seen it. Normally, I don’t pay attention to cherry trees without flowers.”

She nodded in agreement with my honest remark.

“That’s true. I only found out because I happened to see a sign.”

Her gentle smile and serene presence comforted me. The young cherry blossom trees, drenched by the rain, drooped toward us. The row of trees appeared to stretch endlessly along the road.

“I wonder how far it goes.”

“Let’s go and find out.”

“Yeah.”

I released the mental map from my mind. It felt reassuring to have her say that.

The row of *hazakura* trees continued along the riverbank. As she had mentioned, in spring, this road would transform into a beautiful avenue adorned with cherry blossoms.

“Perhaps it runs along the riverbank all the way.”

When we reached a major street named Sanjō-dori, we found the place we were looking for. The sign read Sanjō-Kiyamachi, marking the intersection of both streets.

This was it.

As soon as I let go of the fragmented map in my head, my grandmother’s voice resurfaced vividly. It was interesting how my mind could recall it so clearly once the stress had dissipated.

“Keiichi-kun, where are you heading?” asked Saki.

“We came all the way to Kyoto in summer, so how about trying *kawayuka*?”

Kawayuka were terraces erected over Kamogawa River, built with wooden towers and scaffolding. During summer, the shops along the river collaborate to set up temporary platforms over it.

Saki expressed her concern as she walked beside me. “Isn’t kawayuka riverside dining expensive?” At the same time, we turned right at Sanjō-Kiyamachi, heading toward Sanjō Ōhashi Bridge. Being from Kyoto, she was likely familiar with the kawadoko tradition on Kamogawa River, kawayuka, and I had heard the food there could be pricey.

“It’s alright. I was told about a good place to go.”

I considered that the cost might be high for high school students, but today, my grandmother had told me about it. *“There’s a coffee shop at the foot of Sanjō Ōhashi Bridge that has a kawayuka. You don’t have to pay for the seating, so why not give it a try?”*

I wanted to go there. I wanted to enjoy Kyoto’s summer tradition with Saki.

“Is this...?”

Her eyes moved slowly up and down the brick building.

“It’s my first time here.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

She entered the store with the words *Starbucks Coffee* on it, her childlike eyes lighting up. “Wow, what’s this? How is it made?” she mumbled to herself and followed me.

“Oh? Aren’t we going to order...?” I heard Saki’s voice from behind again as we passed the long line of customers in front of the register. It seemed a naturally vocalized thought. Even if it was another mumbled monologue, this time I turned my head. “I thought I’d get a seat first.”

“I see.”

We left the ground-floor shop and made our way to the terrace. A cool breeze flowed in from Kamogawa River.

“Wow...” she exclaimed with delight in a space where we could overlook the river and the cityscape of Kyoto.

“It’s amazing, isn’t it?”

She looked up at me while speaking. As expected of a popular café, every seat was occupied. Each person spent their time differently on the riverside — some were embracing the unhurried passage of time; others relished the cool night breeze, immersing themselves in the sounds of the river and the rustling of the wind against their skin.

“It’s crowded, isn’t it?” Her voice lowered.

Perhaps we should move to another floor where there might be vacant seats? That thought crossed my mind as I scanned the area, but a seat in the farthest corner became available. It was the prime spot closest to Kamogawa River.

“It’s open now.”

“Lucky.”

We’d managed to secure the best seats in Kyoto for summer. Each with a cup of coffee in hand, we returned to our prime spot by the riverside. The cool breeze gently brushed our cheeks, and Saki exclaimed, “It feels so good.”

In front of us, we had a view of Kamogawa River, Sanjō Ōhashi Bridge, and the expansive mountains beyond. Along the river, couples sat at regular intervals, just as rumored. Though we couldn’t hear each other’s voices, we felt a sense of companionship, as if we weren’t alone.

The night transformed Kamogawa River into a beautiful sight, illuminated by the lights along its banks. In the dark sky, the blue moon appeared once again. The blue lights reflected on the water, shimmering brightly.

For some reason, I felt a tinge of something special.

“I didn’t know... when was it built?” she murmured quietly.

I chuckled and called out to the green-aproned staff member cleaning up nearby, “Excuse me, when was this place built?”

“The riverside platforms? We started about five years ago.”

“It’s wonderful.”

“Thank you very much.”

She smiled politely and bowed before returning to the kitchen. I thought she was a very courteous staff member.

“But still...”

When Saki turned toward me and said that, her expression momentarily froze in surprise before quickly transforming into a smile as she said, “Thank you.”

“So, this has been here a long time. I’ll brag about it to my friends at school tomorrow,” Saki said, scrunching up her nose.

“Are you meeting friends?”

“No, they invited me to hang out, but I’m not good with crowds, so I rarely go out in town.”

“What?” My expression froze for a moment, which Saki immediately noticed.

“But it seems I’ve convinced myself that I’m not good with crowds. Today, I don’t even think about that, and it’s so much fun.”

“I’m glad.” I let out a sigh of relief from the depths of my heart.

Orange lights dotted the raised platform along the riverbank, resembling fireflies. The orange streetlights around us blurred, making it difficult to distinguish where the land ended and the sky began as they extended toward the river.

“The view from here is truly beautiful. It feels like it will be a cherished memory.”

Standing on solid ground, I felt as though I was floating in a peculiar space. In this space, her profile illuminated by the orange light appeared even more captivating.

Time gradually passed as our conversation continued. There were so many things I wanted to know and ask her. She seemed to open up more with me, and before we knew it, time had flown by. It seemed the same for those around us — suddenly, I noticed the number of couples had multiplied.

I wonder if we look like one of those couples.

“Did our team win the game today?” she spoke softly.

“Was there a Sanga game today?”

When I heard the word game, my mind automatically went to soccer. She was an avid fan of Kyoto Sanga.

“Yes. Today there was a Purple Sanga match. I wonder if they won. I’m curious,” she said, prompting me to take out my smartphone from my pocket.

“I’ll check.”

As I was about to launch Yahoo, her face drew close to mine.

She’s so close.

My heart skipped a beat. I instinctively leaned back.

“I’m checking now,” I told Saki, who was fixed on my phone screen.

She must really love soccer to lean forward like that out of curiosity. I felt a mix of happiness that Saki was close and worry that she could hear my heart pounding incessantly in my chest. I mustered the courage and swiped the screen with my trembling fingers, and Saki asked with a serious expression, “What is that?”

“What? It’s a smartphone.”

“Smart... phone?” she emphasized the s.

“Don’t you know what it is?”

“It’s my first time seeing one.”

Is she joking?

Maybe she’s unfamiliar with these devices because her dormitory doesn’t allow cell phones. With that in mind, I glanced around. There were about thirty seats on the riverside platform, and they were all occupied, yet no one had a smartphone.

Everyone with a phone had a flip phone. There were also a few people engrossed in their screens.

I've heard that in Tokyo cafés, many people are glued to their smartphones while sipping their coffee. I wondered if flip phones were popular in Kyoto.

My curiosity piqued, but when I tried to look up the soccer results online, it wouldn't work. My smartphone seemed unresponsive.

Could it be that the smartphone I bought in Tokyo is incompatible in Kyoto? No, that can't be true. Didn't I talk to Yuuya at Grandma's house this afternoon?

So, is there no signal here? In the middle of the city like this? It shouldn't be like that, right? I pondered but couldn't comprehend the reason.

At that moment, one of the digits on the screen changed. It was already that time.

"Sorry, Saki. I couldn't find much due to the poor reception, but I hope Sanga is winning."

"Yeah! They'll definitely win. I believe in them," she responded with a smile, clenching her fist.

Seeing her enthusiasm, I imagined how delighted the players would be to have such supportive fans.

"Well then, shall we head off soon?" I stood from my seat and said.

"Okay."

We left the establishment. We were so at ease there that we almost ended up spending the entire night there.

Afterward, following Saki's suggestion, we arrived at Shinkyōgoku.

"I wanted to come here once..."

Was she really a Kyoto native? Everything seemed fresh and new to her. Her clear eyes shined brightly. We entered a store that sold traditional Japanese goods. The vibrant Kyoto-yuzen purses and handkerchiefs were pleasing to the eye.

They seemed to tickle Saki's girlish heart, and her smile grew wider and wider.

“I want to buy something as a keepsake. Hmm, I can’t decide. Keiichi-kun, can we look around a bit more?”

“Sure.”

We embarked on a shopping spree at the Japanese goods stores in Shinkyōgoku, fulfilling Saki’s request. Lacking local knowledge, we unintentionally wandered away from the shopping district through a parallel street, Teramachi-dori. We found ourselves in a sprawling market adorned with the words *Nishiki Ichiba* overhead. But it had already closed.

“This isn’t it, right?”

“Yeah. Looks like we got lost.”

As I was about to turn back from the market, where the smell of food wafted, I made eye contact with a guy cleaning up in front of a pickled vegetable shop at the entrance of the arcade. When I lowered my head, he said, “Hey bro, sis, take this,” handing me a skewer of lightly pickled cucumbers.

“Is it okay?” I asked.

“Yeah, it’s fine. It’s no good if it’s left over, anyway,” he replied.

“Wow, I love lightly pickled cucumbers. Thank you very much.” Saki held the skewered cucumbers in her hand and innocently rejoiced.

I made a mental note that she loved lightly pickled cucumbers.

“And how about you, bro?”

“I like them too,” I replied.

“Really?” asked Saki.

“Actually, it’s my first time eating them,” I admitted.

“These are delicious. You should bring them on a date,” he said.

Cucumbers on a date? “Did you think, ‘Why are we eating cucumbers on a date?’”

“Uh-huh.” I laughed, trying to cover up what was in my heart.

Then the guy secretly whispered, “Hey, sis, you’re pretty. Is this your first date? It’s so cute that I couldn’t resist giving these to you, even though I don’t

usually do that. The god of cucumbers is with you, so do your best! Bro!”

We shook hands tightly as our eyes met. I strongly felt that Kyoto was not only elegant but also vibrant and interesting.

After eating the cucumbers, we enjoyed visiting shops that seemed to be found only in this town, such as a fan and folding screen specialty store in Teramachi-Sanjō, a handmade soap store, and a small bookstore that Saki found on the way. She bought a paperback book to put into the *chirimen* - patterned book cover she had purchased earlier.

She happily said, “I’ll read this with the cover on.”

“Hmm? Do I like books?” I asked. I remembered she had said she only read manga.

“Actually, this is the first time I’ve bought a paperback,” Saki said, looking a bit embarrassed.

“I see. What brought about the change of heart?”

“Well, manga doesn’t fit in this book cover, does it?” she replied.

“That’s true.”

Apparently, she was drawn to the silk pattern on the book cover. The paperback book she bought was a romance novel.

“I’m not sure why, but I was attracted to this book,” she said, taking the book out of the plastic bag.

The book’s obi had words of love written on it and a beautiful cover. The cover illustration was a bit similar to Saki’s drawings.

“The cover is beautiful,” I said as I peered into the paperback book in her hand.

“Yeah. The illustration is so beautiful that you want to keep looking at it.” I truly believed it was a magnificent illustration that attracted people.

“Moreover, the words on this obi are also lovely.”

Obi?

At Saki’s words, I looked at the obi.

“To the one and only you in the world.” I read the words on the obi, and she smiled happily.

“Don’t you think these words are meant for one’s destined partner?” She spun the words gently and kindly.

“Yeah,” I replied.

“I hope that someday, I can fall in love with someone I feel this way for.”

“Yeah.”

“To the one and only you in the world.” I could feel my heart slowly warming to those words.

What are the chances of finding someone in this vast world as drawn to you as you are to them, as if it were a miracle? If there’s a book that can make that miracle come true, I would like to read it. I want someone to teach me how to make destiny bring me true love.

“I wonder what kind of book it is. I’m looking forward to it,” Saki murmured as she looked at the paperback affectionately; then, she put it in the plastic bag she had been carrying and looked at me.

“Come to think of it, Keiichi, are you someone who reads books?”

“Yeah. Only the popular ones though.”

“Can you recommended any books?”

“I’d recommend...”

As I told her about the books, we walked the streets of Kyoto. Time passed slowly but surely. Fun times always seem to go by too fast.

As a souvenir, we went into a game center and took some *purikura* photos together before leaving. The clock tower on the shopping street showed nine o’clock, and the once-bustling street shuttered as the stores closed.

The night in Kyoto’s streets, which should be longer than the night in Arashiyama, had already come to an end. As I felt lonely in the town that had changed its colors, I heard a voice saying, “It’s already this late. I’m going to miss it.” At the same time, I felt a thud on my back.

“Kyaa!”

I looked down and saw a girl I didn't know who had bumped into me and fallen. She looked around the same age or a little younger.

"Are you okay?" I reached out my hand to her.

She looked up at me, sitting on the ground with a red face, and said, "Thank you."

While saying that, she took my hand. I put some strength into my arm and helped the girl stand up.

"Um, sorry. Come on, Nana, what are you doing? Let's go!"

"Yeah. Sorry. Um, excuse me."

Together with a friend who came later, the two ran off through the shopping street.

"Did you see that person earlier?"

"He was cool," they talked like that.

That's right. It's better for them to go home...

Watching them run away, I felt a gaze from next to me. When I gently shifted my gaze, I found Saki staring at me.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." She shook her head.

"Well then, shall we go?"

"Yeah."

We left the arcade without any particular destination or words. The night sky above was open, and the beautiful moon shined blue as usual. Twinkling stars scattered across the night sky.

"Shall we go home?" I asked Saki, who was walking beside me.

After a few seconds of silence, she replied, "Yeah." Her pace slowed, and she avoided eye contact, looking down.

I knew that assuming she felt lonely and regretful was merely my selfish desire, but I still wanted to express it. "If, I don't know..." I started.

“What?” she interrupted, raising her face abruptly.

“If you have time, there’s one more place I’d like to visit.”

Saki smiled and responded, “Let’s go.”

We headed to Kawaramachi Station and boarded a bright orange train that had just arrived. The train rattled as it began to move.

At Katsura Station, we transferred to the Arashiyama line and got off at Matsuo Station, the station just before Arashiyama. There were no people on the platform. Passing through the unmanned ticket gate, we encountered a shop with a sign that read *Fruit Parlor*. Saki halted in front of the shop, looking concerned.

“Keiichi, is this the place?”

I understood why she would ask. The station lacked the usual vibrancy of a tourist spot, instead embodying a serene atmosphere for Kyoto residents.

“Have you ever been to Suzumushi Temple, Saki?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“I’m thinking of going there now.”

“Suzumushi Temple, what a lovely name for a temple. Sounds great. Okay, let’s go.”

Seeing her smile, I felt relieved.

Yesterday, when I accompanied Akane, she’d mentioned “one place I want to go to before we leave” and brought me to Suzumushi Temple. During the scorching daytime with shimmering skies, Akane and I made our way to Suzumushi Temple, sweating and bathed in the dazzling sunlight.

To escape the heat of the sweltering summer, I engaged in conversation with the silent Akane.

“*Suzumushi Temple — is it a temple that keeps crickets?*” I asked, expecting a negative response.

However, Akane calmly answered, “Yes, *that’s right*,” and continued speaking. “*There are supposedly six thousand crickets on the temple grounds. It’s called Suzumushi*

Temple because crickets sing there all year round."

Her words surprised me.

"Akane, do you like crickets?"

My hot-tempered sister, overwhelmed by the summer heat, lashed out at me.
"I'm not going there for that reason. Geez! Just shut up and follow me, big brother"

"I'm only doing this because of you," I muttered.

I often thought she couldn't live without me. *Seriously.*

Today, unlike yesterday, was a tranquil summer night with falling stars. A cool and serene atmosphere permeated the air.

We were on our way to Suzumushi Temple. When I went there with Akane, it took about twenty minutes from the station to reach it.

Now, at night, I wanted to arrive as soon as possible, considering Saki's dormitory curfew, so I could escort her before that. As we stepped onto a main street, a city bus labeled *Suzumushi Temple* came to a gradual stop at a bus stop about five meters ahead.

"Saki, let's get on that."

I hurried ahead and signaled the bus to wait.

"Excuse me, we'd like to ride."

Saki and I boarded the bus and took seats in the back row. The seats were elevated, providing a view of the interior. Two company workers, two women resembling office workers, and a man who appeared to be a university student were also on the bus.

"It's been a while since I last rode a bus," Saki commented casually as she observed the surroundings.

I shifted my gaze toward her and said, *"Really? I ride it every day."*

"That's nice," she replied.

"No, it's not. It's different when it's empty like this. It's usually crowded."

"Are you holding the strap?"

“Yeah, usually I don’t get a seat.”

“Are there girls around you?”

“Well, yes.”

Both boys and girls were mingled together. I assumed it was normal for trains and buses to be crowded during rush hour, but perhaps it’s different in Kyoto?

Oh, Saki doesn’t take school transportation, as I realized this, she made an unexpected comment.

“That means... love is about to blossom, right?”

I coughed and choked.

“Are you alright?”

“Yeah... I’m fine.”

Is it because of that romance novel she just purchased? It is a very schoolgirl-like way of thinking.

Certainly, some friends would be thrilled to see cute girls from other schools on the bus, but the crowded and stuffy spaces were simply uncomfortable for me. I had no intention of seeking love there.

“Has love blossomed?” Saki gently inquired when I didn’t respond.

The topic of love greatly unsettled me. I was not good at discussing myself, especially when it came to matters of love.

“It hasn’t,” I replied coldly, trying to cut off the conversation. However, Saki eagerly pursued it.

“By the way... do you have a girlfriend?”

Did she think I wouldn’t be interested in finding new love on the crowded bus because I already had a girlfriend? Both assumptions were incorrect.

“I don’t have one. But if I did...” I trailed off, glancing at her sitting next to me.

Suddenly, it seemed like I saw small angelic wings behind Saki’s back. She concealed them and turned her round eyes toward me, tilting her head as if to ask again.

“If you did...?”

“Right now, I wouldn’t be playing with you like this.”

“You’re... serious,” her voice sounded muffled.

“Am I serious? Maybe I’m just clumsy,” I replied, concealing my ulterior motives.

I wanted to spend more time with her. I wanted to hear her clear voice and see her adorable smile. But with such pure and innocent intentions, having any hidden agenda was difficult.

“I wonder if the girl who becomes your girlfriend will truly be happy,” she murmured, gazing at the starry night sky outside the bus window as if confiding in the stars.

What expression does she wear now? I can’t see her face as she turns away. I wish she would face me.

Her shadow faintly reflected in the bus window. Her eyes seemed to hold a hint of sadness.

What was she thinking? Who was on her mind?

If the girl who becomes my girlfriend truly feels that way, I’d make Saki happier than anyone else, I thought strongly. But I won’t let her see me wearing that kind of expression.

Suppressing my thoughts, which almost escaped as words, I squeezed the small amulet in my pocket. It was yellow with the words *Jizo of Happiness* inscribed in it, a memento from Suzumushi Temple.

In my pocket, I drew strength from it.

“*Suzumushi Temple holds a certain magic, you know.*” I’d come here one last time today because I wanted to believe in my sister’s words.

We reached the bus stop, disembarked, and walked along the path leading to Suzumushi Temple. The sound of flowing water filled the air as we approached. Soon, we came across a picturesque river with a quaint bridge.

Crossing it, we continued along the path. Despite the dark sky, the blue moon cast its nostalgic glow upon us. The full moon above the towering bamboo grove bathed Kyoto's night in a dreamlike hue.

The vast expanse of the blue sky seems to dilute the colors of ordinary life, creating a faint and ephemeral world. This summer felt special. I couldn't help but sense it.

A sign with the words *Suzumushi-dera* came into view. Behind it stood a long stone staircase.

"Watch your step," I cautioned.

"Okay," she replied, following closely behind as I led the way up.

"It's dark," she remarked.

"Yes, it is. Are you alright?"

"Yeah... It's hard to see, but I'll manage."

Tall trees with umbrella-like branches, verdant and imposing, lined the stone steps as if observing us. In this place, where the illusion of a long stone staircase in the heart of a lush forest was easy to conjure, the moonlight struggled to reach us.

The steps were particularly challenging to discern at the beginning of our ascent. Unlike me, who had climbed them before, she struggled on her maiden climb.

"Saki," I said, noticing her slight difficulty.

Instinctively, I reached out my hand toward her unsteady footing. She briefly looked at my outstretched palm, then placed her hand atop mine. It gently enveloped mine. Her hand felt smaller than I had imagined, and a pang of pain surged through my chest, accompanied by a warm flush in my cheeks.

I continued walking up, gaze fixed straight ahead. Gradually, the main hall of the temple came into view.

As we ascended the steps, our view widened. At the top, we were greeted by the entrance gate to Suzumushi Temple. The gate stood firmly closed, denying us entry. Beside it, a Jizo statue basked in radiant light.

“This Jizo statue seems so luminous,” I commented.

Whether it was an optical illusion due to the light emanating from behind or the overwhelming power of the Jizo statue itself, I couldn’t discern. In its right hand, the Jizo held a *shakujou* (a staff with metal rings used by Buddhist monks), and in its left hand, a *houju* (a sacred gem believed to grant wishes). Uniquely, it wore straw sandals, a characteristic of this particular Jizo statue in Japan.

Yesterday, at noon, when Akane and I had visited Suzumushi Temple, we were granted access to the main hall to listen to the priest’s sermon. Recalling the words I heard from the priest, I shared what I had learned with Saki.

“This Jizo statue is called the Jizo of Happiness.”

“Okay.”

“When you make a wish you deeply desire to this Jizo statue, it will grant it for you.”

I handed the yellow amulet from my pocket to Saki.

“What’s this?”

The light that illuminated the Jizo statue also shined upon Saki.

“It’s an amulet. You can also use it to make a wish,” I explained.

Curious, she inquired, “How do I use it?”

I pointed to the word *happiness* inscribed in the center.

“Hold it between your hands, making sure the happiness part is facing outward,” I instructed.

“Like this?” she asked, mimicking the gesture.

“Yes, exactly like that. Make your wish in that position. Just remember, you can only make one wish,” I cautioned.

“Only one wish...” she repeated thoughtfully.

“After making your wish, state your name and address. This Jizo statue will visit your home to grant your wish. See the straw sandals he’s wearing? That’s how he travels to fulfill wishes,” I elaborated.

“Really?” Her eyes glistened with excitement.

Yesterday, Akane had said, “*There’s a spell that grants anyone’s wish, but only one wish.*”.

The rumor, circulating among junior high school students, transcended the boundaries of Buddhism and ventured into the realm of fantasy, captivating young hearts.

“*My friend came here, made a wish, and then she got a boyfriend,*” my little sister had blurted out, her cheeks tinged with a blush.

I couldn’t help but think, *Hey, isn’t having a boyfriend in middle school too early?*

Well, during my time, some people had started dating in middle school, but when it came to my little sister, it felt different.

At that moment, Akane had closed her eyes, adopting a serious expression. She’d tightened her grip on the amulet and bowed her head. After a while, she’d lifted her face and asked, “*Brother, don’t you have any wishes?*”

I replied, “*I’m good.*” I didn’t have anything specific to wish for.

In that moment, my thoughts were consumed by Saki. I had contemplated giving her the recently acquired amulet. As I had observed my sister making her wish, my mind had also been occupied by thoughts of Saki. If Saki’s wish could be granted, there would be no greater joy. The wish I had harbored throughout the day was now coming true.

Standing before the Jizo statue, Saki held up the character for happiness on her amulet and bowed her head, making her wish. Unlike Akane, her expression was gentle, with a slight uplift at the corners of her mouth and softly closed eyelids. Surely, she was wishing for that one thing that would bring her happiness.

What could Saki’s wish be? Earlier, she had been squatting alone by the edge of the tranquil spring, scooping up stars. She gazed at the moon, Kyoto Tower shining like a candle, and celebrated her birthday with her mother in the moonlight. She pointed and said, “*Keiichi, this is my home,*” then proceeded to create a pale-colored drawing that no one else could replicate in Hinata Dormitory.

“I rode the Randen for the first time.”

She hadn't traveled by train or bus or explored Kyoto's bustling city center. What was that one wish she, who didn't possess much, longed to have granted?

The faint chime of bell crickets resonated from the main hall. Bell crickets were creatures of the night, with the male emitting that distinctive sound to attract a female. *The abbot had mentioned it, hadn't he...?*

At night, the bell crickets sang, producing the most beautiful melody in the world — a scratchy, intermittent sound directed toward the one they had fallen in love with. Their behavior mirrored mine. Though unable to utter the word love, my feelings continued to blossom, and I expressed my sentiments differently by her side. I hoped that these emotions would reach her.

“Are you finished with your wish? Keiichi-kun, are you alright?” Her voice brought me back to reality. She had completed her wish and was now looking at me.

“I'm fine,” I replied.

“By the way, did you make a wish when you came here with your sister yesterday?”

“Yes, I did,” I lied.

“I'm glad. Here's your amulet back. Thank you,” she said, extending it toward me.

I shook my head and declined. “You keep it.”

“Are you sure?”

“They say the amulet contains a Jizo-sama, the embodiment of a happy Jizo, who will protect the person holding it.”

“Thank you. I'll keep it with me,” she responded, a smile gracing her lips as she lovingly gazed at the amulet in her hand. In the moonlight, she appeared ethereal and radiant. My heart swelled with happiness.

“And also...” I reached into the opposite pocket of the amulet and pulled out a small bag, handing it to her gently.

“If you’d like, you can have this too.”

Saki looked at me with a puzzled expression.

“I found it yesterday, thinking it would look good on you.”

In truth, I had hesitated about giving it to her. I was worried receiving it might be inconvenient or overwhelming for her. But if the opportunity arose, I’d wanted to, so I’d kept it hidden in my pocket.

“Is it alright?”

She stood before the small gift bag, appearing unsure. I nodded silently. “Yes, of course.” Since I’d bought it with her in mind, I hoped she’d accept it.

“May I open it?” Saki asked, hesitantly holding the bag.

I nodded.

“Wow,” I heard her exclaim as she peered inside.

Inside was a hair accessory adorned with a star. The hairpin had a large star at the top, with a delicate string of smaller shimmering stars hanging down, creating a beautiful ornament for the hair.

When I saw this hair accessory at the store yesterday, I immediately thought of Saki. Without hesitation, I took it to the cashier while Akane had gone to the next store. I was surprised by my impulsive behavior, but now I understood why I’d bought it. I’d simply wanted to see Saki’s joyful expression.

“A hair accessory?” she murmured as she delicately held it up.

Before her eyes, a large star and small stars came into view. The thin string that held the small stars beneath the large star swayed gently in the wind. Perhaps she’d only noticed the prominent large star when she glanced into the bag.

She seemed speechless upon realizing there were also small shining stars dangling from it. Saki stared at it quietly, her mouth slightly agape. I began to worry that I had somehow failed, as I expected her to say something like “It’s beautiful” or “I’m so happy.”

“Don’t you like it?”

She shook her head in response to my question, and tears welled up in her glistening eyes. She pressed her lips tightly together, holding back the tears that clung to her long lashes.

“Eh, Saki?” I called out to her, and she spoke at the same time.

A mist of tears blurred her vision, quickly pooling in her eyes. As she blinked, the tears streaked down her cheeks.

“Why?” Her voice seemed distant as if it didn’t belong to her, and I heard the word again.

Her lips parted slightly, and her slender shoulders trembled. She cried, her gaze fixed on the star ornament in her hand. I couldn’t fathom the meaning behind her tears, but I wanted to wipe them away for her. I extended my right hand, but it trembled so uncontrollably that it felt like someone else’s. I tried to reach out and brush away her tears, exerting all my effort to move my right hand, but she took a step forward.

A sweet, lingering fragrance wafted, and her forehead collided with my chest with a soft thud. Warm breaths tickled my neck, and my heart felt like it was about to burst. I could no longer move my hand, frozen in place. Saki, who had entrusted me with a fraction of her weight, repeated, “Why?” like a child who had forgotten her words. And then, she fell silent again, quietly shedding tears.

The stars shimmered in the night sky, and fragments of starlight, illuminated by the blue moon, gently descended. It seemed as though she was fading into the azure landscape, so I pulled her gently toward me with one hand. My hand, which had struggled to move before, now reached out naturally, as if it were meant to be. We shared our warmth.

She continued to weep in my embrace, her tears flowing ceaselessly.

“I’m sorry...”

“You apologize too much.”

“Yeah... but...”

Afterward, we left Suzumushi Temple and made our way back to Arashiyama. We disembarked at Hankyū-Arashiyama Station and strolled toward her

dormitory. All the shops were closed, and the only sounds echoing through the quiet streets were our footsteps and hushed conversations. As we walked, Saki continued to apologize for bursting into tears at Suzumushi Temple.

“You’re worrying too much. Just let it go,” I reassured her.

She stopped walking when I said that, and I noticed numerous white lights shining at her feet. It was the illumination from the bridge.

Unbeknownst to us, we had reached Togetsukyō Bridge.

“I’m certain I won’t forget it.”

“Huh?”

“I... even if it was just a coincidence, it made me happy.”

She spoke as if recalling something. I wanted to inquire further, to uncover the truth behind her words, but I refrained, fearing it might make her cry again.

“I understand,” was all I said, raising my gaze toward the source of the light. Above Togetsukyō Bridge, a blue full moon radiated its brilliance.

The blue moon, observed from Togetsukyō Bridge, added to the enchantment of Arashiyama’s landscape. The celestial orb blended seamlessly with the scenery, as if its presence there was entirely natural.

For a while, we gazed at the moon together. The blue glow enveloped us, and time seemed to slow down.

“It’s like the moon is crossing the bridge,” she whispered beside me, captivated by the breathtaking panorama before us.

“What does that mean?” I inquired, shifting my attention toward her.

She turned to me, her eyes meeting mine, and replied, “My mother told me about it a long time ago. It’s the origin of the name Togetsukyō Bridge.”

As she spoke with a smile, sharing her knowledge of the moon, I felt a sense of relief. I exhaled softly and asked, “I’ve never heard of it. What does it signify?”

“Many years ago, an emperor took a boat ride along this river on a night with a full moon. He gazed at the sky and remarked, ‘It’s as if the moon is crossing the bridge,’” she explained.

“I see,” I responded.

“It was named Togetsukyō Bridge because it looked like the moon was crossing over it,” she added.

“I see.”

Togetsukyō Bridge, also known as the bridge the moon crosses over... What a beautiful name.

I imagined that the full moon above us emerged from the east, where the Katsura River flowed, gracefully traversed the bridge and disappeared behind the western mountains. It was undoubtedly a sight that had captivated the people of old, inspiring them to bestow upon this bridge a name befitting its splendor.

“Is the origin story of the bridge’s name well-known in Kyoto?” I asked.

“I wonder... Perhaps my mother happened to know because she had a deep love for the moon and stars,” she replied.

Togetsukyō Bridge stood serenely in place, with the full moon bright overhead. I fell in love with the understated yet breathtaking scenery and the town of Arashiyama that continued to safeguard it.

“It’s exceptionally beautiful tonight,” I commented.

Looking up at the night sky, Saki remarked, “Yes. Perhaps it’s because the moon is blue.”

In response to my nod, Saki’s eyes were no longer filled with tears.

“I’m glad we came today. To have the chance to see the moon from Togetsukyō Bridge on a night with a full blue moon.”

I’d forever cherish Saki’s words, spoken almost like a soliloquy.

Because I was thinking the same thing.

We quickly found ourselves in the forest after crossing Togetsukyō Bridge and engaging in lighthearted conversation as we walked along Arashiyama Street. We followed the mountain path, traversed the overgrown woods, and made our way toward the secluded blue spring.

Although the sky was clear and adorned with beautiful twinkling stars, the mountain path was damp, and the edges of the spring were still muddy. When Saki tried to retrieve the transparent umbrella hanging from a tree, I stopped her.

“I’ll go get it.”

“But...”

“It’s okay.”

My sneakers were already dirty, and I didn’t want her to soil her shoes. I made my way toward the spring, feeling a sense of nervousness about whether the paper was still there or not. I had left the umbrella and the letter in this very spot at the beginning of the night.

As I peeked beneath the umbrella, I discovered the white paper was still there, undisturbed and seemingly asleep. No one had come to retrieve it, meaning that Saki’s first love hadn’t shown up today either. That should have been a reason to rejoice, but I felt a sense of melancholy for some reason.

If I were to tell Saki the letter remained untouched, she would likely put on a desolate expression... or perhaps force a smile like she had yesterday. My legs felt heavy as I made my way back to her, clutching the white paper.

She glanced at the paper and softly murmured, “I see...” Her voice sounded as if she had already resigned herself to the outcome, but she believed... That’s the impression I got.

“Is it no longer possible?” she whispered, almost to the night sky.

“Will he never come again?” Her eyes sparkled with a glimmer of hope.

“This will be our last summer.” After uttering those words, her eyes trembled ever so gently.

“You’re no longer waiting?” I asked softly.

My emotions were entangled between not wanting her to wait for someone else and not wanting her to give up on the person she had been waiting for. I was in turmoil.

“I can’t wait anymore,” she replied.

“After this summer... I, too, must leave this town.”

She had revealed this information at the coffee shop near Sanjō Ōhashi Bridge.

“It will become a cherished memory,” she had said in the nighttime tranquility of the Hinata Dormitory. *“This dormitory is scheduled to be demolished. Everyone living here will be relocated, starting with the younger children who have already found new homes.”*

I’d had a major misconception. I had assumed that only the younger children were being moved. I had mistakenly believed that the high school students residing in the old familial dormitory would continue to reside here. But upon reflection, I knew that couldn’t be the case.

And she, too, was one of the children moving out from the Hinata Dormitory.

“Where will you go?” my voice quivered.

“To a new facility up north,” she replied, gazing into the distance. A tinge of sorrow shadowed her gaze.

“Or I have to choose between that and being placed with a foster family who has been waiting for me indefinitely.”

I found myself unable to speak.

“I should have made my decision by now, but I can’t.”

She smiled with self-deprecation. “Everyone thinks I’ve already made up my mind.”

By “everyone,” she must have been referring to the children at the facility. To Saki, they were like siblings from whom she was separated.

“I wonder how they’re doing.”

“...”

“But even if something happens, Jizo-sama will come to help, right?”

Saki had used her one wish for the happiness of her distant brothers and sisters. She had wished for the well-being of her siblings, who resided far from this town.

Observing her in this moment, a memory surfaced within me.

“Good boy, good boy.”

She had whispered those words while gently stroking my hair in that room with the little children.

“Isn’t this what an older sister does?”

It was likely one of her playful remarks.

“It’s nothing.”

Her expression at that moment was resolute. It was her everyday existence, caring for the many younger brothers and sisters.

“I, too, must bring an end to my first love tomorrow.”

“...”

“I must properly conclude it and do my best in a new place.”

The blue moon lasts for four days.

Tomorrow, she would bring the curtain down on her first love, which she had discovered in this place. And when summer drew to a close, she would depart for an unfamiliar town.

My heart ached.

The scenery appeared surreal, and everything except Saki appeared hazy. My body weakened, and the white paper slipped from my grasp, fluttering away.

On that drifting white paper were the numbers she had written and the words I had penned above her phone number.

Saki Komiya is waiting for you. If you find this letter, please call this number. Please make sure to contact me.

That earnest plea was more than just an expression of my own feelings; it was a fervent wish for Saki’s love to be fulfilled.

I must have thought of her when I saw her at the spring today. I had a strong desire to grant her love and fulfill her wish. It was then that I became aware of my own deep-seated longing. I gazed up at the extraordinary blue moon and

made a wish: *May her wish come true. May her future be filled with blooming, joyful flowers...* If her wish was granted, nothing else mattered to me. Therefore, I implored the blue moon to bring happiness to Saki. With all my strength, I prayed to the blue moon.

CHAPTER 4

After parting with Saki, I wandered around Arashiyama before returning to my grandma's house. As I pushed open the heavy front door, a chime rang. "I'm home," I murmured, knowing there would be no answer. Still, I entered the house.

If my mother found out I had come home at this hour, she would surely scold me. I was aware of that, but my steps felt unusually heavy.

"Welcome back," a calm voice reached me from behind as I absentmindedly passed through the entrance hall and walked along the veranda leading to my room. I could see the figure of a person sitting on the veranda, partially hidden in the shadows.

I flicked on the nearby light switch, and the soft orange glow illuminated the person's face: silver hair intermingled with white, eyes with wrinkles at the corners, and a gentle smile overflowing like spilled liquid. "I'm home, Grandma," I said, recognizing that it was indeed her.

My grandma sat on the veranda like a figurine. I approached her and asked softly, "Are you waiting for me again today?"

"Yes," she replied.

"Today too?"

"Yes." She nodded.

As my grandma looked up at the night sky, I couldn't help but follow her gaze. It had become a habit of mine, but tonight, I didn't feel like gazing at the night sky.

In fact, I had no intention of standing on the veranda. Today, my plan was to return to my room unnoticed by anyone and bury myself under the covers, forcing out the world. I didn't want to think about anything. I wanted the day to end quickly. However, I couldn't ignore that Grandma had been waiting for me

until this late hour, so I sat beside her. There were no signs of anyone else being awake at this time.

“You were later than yesterday,” I heard Grandma’s whispering voice from a distance. “I was worried you might have gotten lost,” she added.

My mind was still lost in the forest.

“Keiichi?” She touched my shoulder, bringing me back to my senses.

When I looked at her, she murmured, as if peering into my eyes, “Did something happen? You look like you’re about to cry.”

“Do I look that way?”

“Yes. That’s how you appear, but is there something else?”

As she said that, her face seemed oddly lonely, and I couldn’t help but let out a wry laugh. Grandma’s presence was always kind and serene, and I suddenly remembered.

“Thank you for today. Grandma, you taught me so much, and I had a wonderful time exploring the city of Kyoto.” I spoke to her with a bewildered expression.

“I taught you? Me?”

“Yes. Don’t you remember?”

“No... I’ll try to remember.”

As I expected, Grandma’s dementia seemed to have worsened at night, but she didn’t seem to mind, and asked, “Did you have fun?”

“I had a lot of fun.”

It had been our first and last outing together.

Saki and I had strolled the unfamiliar streets of Kyoto. We’d sipped coffee by the riverbank, explored various trinket shops, indulged in skewered cucumber pickles, bought beautiful books, and took purikura photos. Finally, we’d visited Suzumushi Temple.

Everything had been so enjoyable that just recalling it now made my heart quiver. Saki was adorable and precious no matter where we went. In that blue

world that carried the scent of summer, I fell in love with her all over again. I realized my feelings for her exceeded what others had taught me. I genuinely wished for her happiness. I longed to witness a blossoming smile on her face. Her greatest joy would be when he came to pick her up. She had been yearning for him for six years.

As memories flooded my mind and thoughts spun in circles, a gentle hand touched my head. “Good child, good child...” In the soft, blue glow that absorbed the moonlight and emanated its own light, an elderly woman with kind eyes stroked my hair. Her movements, her voice, and the serene atmosphere all resembled Saki’s.

Despite the overwhelming yearning, I recalled the silhouette of Saki’s face I’d glimpsed in the forest and the words that slipped from her small mouth.

I wonder if she’s doing her best... I hope she’s not in trouble... Even if something happens, the Jizo statue will come and save her, right?

Perhaps she had lovingly caressed her younger siblings in this same manner. I wondered if she conveyed to them that they were the most precious beings in the world. I didn’t know the strength of their bond, but the words she uttered seemed so lonesome and sorrowful... I wanted to ask Grandma about it.

“Hey, Grandma?”

“Hmm?”

“What kind of place is Hinata Dorm?” I had to ask.

*

Today had arrived much like yesterday, with the sky transitioning from a star-filled night to a watery hue, casting gentle rays across the yard. The pine tree and the vibrant flowers in the flowerbed basked in the warm summer morning sun. After taking a nostalgic gaze at the familiar yard where I had played since childhood, I took a deep breath and made my way to the living room.

“Good morning,” I greeted my mother, who was busy preparing breakfast in the kitchen. She turned around, and our eyes met. Her expression showed

surprise, perhaps because I had woken up early. I smiled, thinking about it again.

“Mom, what time are you taking the *shinkansen* tomorrow?”

“I’m planning to take the nine o’clock one.”

“I see... That means everyone will be packing today.”

“Have you made your decision, Keiichi?”

“Yes. I’m going back too... with everyone.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I am.”

It was finally the last day for the first blue moon to bestow its power. If Saki’s love and the purpose of my summer were to end with the blue moon, then I wanted my feelings to be erased along with them.

“But don’t you have a new friend? You’ve been going out with her every night and having fun, right?”

I thought my mother was truly observant. Perhaps she knew everything and was merely pretending not to.

“Yes, but she’ll be leaving soon as well.”

“I see.”

My mother hesitated in her words.

The more I saw Saki, the stronger my feelings grew. I had no idea how to handle these emotions. I was lost. Maybe I could still turn back now. I could quietly place this budding love in a box and close the lid. After all, I only just met her.

“Alright, that’s all I wanted to say.”

Saying that, I tried to leave the living room. As I pushed aside the *noren*, my mother asked, “Keiichi, what about breakfast?”

“I’ll have it after I go back to sleep.”

I returned to my room, slipped into bed, and tightly closed my eyes.

The first person I ever liked was my kindergarten teacher in the Sunflower Group. She was always kind and cheerful, and she praised me often.

Who had been my next crush? There was a girl in the upper grades of elementary school who'd kept bothering me, and even though I found her annoying, I would secretly watch her from behind.

When I reached middle school, a girl from the class next door confessed to me, and we started dating, but I didn't truly understand what it meant to be a couple, so I just focused on playing soccer all the time. Then she said to me, "I don't understand your feelings, Keiichi. Do you really like me?" I didn't understand my own feelings. When she confessed her feelings for me, I agreed to date her. I thought my feelings would develop as we spent time together, but they didn't grow, and a few days later, I apologized, and that was the end of it with her.

Falling for someone, mutual attraction, and becoming lovers — these things seemed easy in manga and dramas, but for me, they were incredibly difficult. While I envied my best friend's awkward love life next to me, I examined myself with a somewhat calm perspective, realizing that I couldn't even think about other people to such an extent.

And yet... I'd arrived in this town and fallen in love in an instant. For the first time in my life, I experienced love at first sight and was so enamored by Saki that my head spun. True to the notion of summer love, this affection was on the verge of ending, but I would never forget it. No, I wouldn't be able to forget.

When I woke up from my nap, Akane was busy packing in her room. I watched her absentmindedly from the veranda, and our eyes met. She said, breaking my reverie, "You're going home too, right? Hurry up and pack."

"I'll do it later."

"Later, later — all you do is talk. You're planning on doing it tomorrow morning, aren't you? I bet you will."

Women are terrifying, just as my mother used to say. Surely, Saki would've said something more gentle and charming. Thinking of her, I shook my head to clear my mind of such thoughts.

“You suddenly shook your head. How gross!”

“Shut up and leave me alone.”

“If you’re going home too, pack today. If you oversleep, I’ll leave you behind.”

“Alright, alright.”

Tired of my sister’s nagging, I retreated to my room. The bed remained unmade, a partially read novel lay on a table, and clothes were scattered about. I wondered which task to tackle first. As I pondered, my eyes fell upon an open suitcase in the corner of the room. I noticed a pencil case inside and a clear blue file containing summer homework and loose-leaf paper.

I hadn’t planned on doing it, but I had brought my homework just in case. I took a pen from the pencil case, pulled a blank sheet of paper from the clear file, and began writing. It wasn’t like me, but I wanted to capture my feelings in words.

Time passed slowly, with the light filtering through the tree branches and casting melancholic dusk. Just then, my phone rang. It was a Line message from Yuuya.

“How was your date?” he wrote in a short message.

“I had a great time,” I began to type, but then muttered, “Oh, damn it!” and scratched my head, erasing everything I had written. I felt a twinge of frustration. Yes, I did have a great time on my date with Saki, but... my feelings that followed the “but” were much stronger. How stubborn were my emotions, refusing to align with my intentions?

I couldn’t bring myself to reply. I pocketed my phone and grabbed a nearby bucket, filling it with water. Wetting a rag in the bucket, I squeezed it tightly and swiftly began wiping down the veranda floor. I moved at an astonishing speed.

“Wow, big brother, you’re amazing.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Let’s leave him alone when he’s like this.”

My sister and mother chatted in the living room, but their words were distant to my ears. When my mind couldn’t keep up, my body compelled me to move,

no matter what.

Amid such activities, night had already fallen. Tonight was the last night I'd spend with Saki. That was why I resolved to smile. I didn't want to wear a gloomy expression in front of her.

"I'm off," I announced to the empty entrance, walking toward town.

Once again, I felt as if an invisible thread was pulling me, the blue moonlight guiding me into the forest.

I was the only one walking toward the forest in this town immersed in darkness.

Everyone else was headed toward Arashiyama Station the opposite way. By taking the train from the station, they could reach the bustling center of Kyoto. It was likely a lively night there.

People moved like characters in a silent movie, fading away from the frame. The sounds dissipated, and it felt like I was the only one left behind in this town.

In the serene landscape, I continued walking, eventually arriving at the forest. As I ventured into the thicket, a fragrance of dry soil and grass greeted my senses. The branches and leaves of the growing trees seemed to beckon as if whispering, "Welcome back." Embracing the mountain path, I developed a fondness for each leaf, feeling a deep connection.

After some time, a verdant clearing unfolded before me. At the heart of this expansive azure realm stood Saki. She was crouched by the spring's edge, playfully manipulating the water with a transparent umbrella, a routine she indulged in daily. She appeared just as resplendent as the day I first fell in love with her — the epitome of beauty in my eyes.

The water's surface reflected the shadows of a grand indigo moon and stars. Even the light of a falling star danced upon the transparent umbrella. For the first time, it seemed as if a tiny star had been ensnared within its canopy. Transfixed by the spectacle, I found myself immobilized; her form was simply too enchanting.

Today's Saki possessed a beauty far surpassing my initial infatuation. Silently beholding her radiance, a gentle breeze stirred, causing ripples in the spring's

water. It was as if fragments of stars were converging within her umbrella. I pondered whether my eyes were playing tricks on me — perhaps it was merely desire reflected in their depths.

In that instant, she directed her gaze at the spring, a gentle smile gracing her face. Scooping up the stars shimmering in their reflection, she wore an expression of pure happiness. Whom was she thinking of in that moment? The answer was already clear.

The exquisite girl still pined for her first love. Even someone like me, unfamiliar with true love, could comprehend this. Unbeknownst to me, I had been crushing the paper in my pocket, and its sharp edge nicked my finger. I could not discern whether the pain that felt like my body was being torn asunder originated from my fingertip or surged from within.

Enduring, I continued observing Saki's profile. Suddenly, a gust swept through the forest from the spring.

“Ah!”

Her transparent umbrella slipped from her grasp, twirling in the wind, and made its way toward me. As I watched it come to rest in front of the hedge, she noticed my presence behind it and slowly lifted her gaze from her feet.

She uttered my name softly. “Keiichi-kun?”

I replied, “Yeah...”

“You’re late today,” she remarked.

“I took a slight detour,” I confessed.

“Where to?”

“Into the heart of the forest.”

“You know there’s nothing there, right?”

“Indeed... you’re correct.”

“What’s the matter?”

She didn’t chastise me for my feeble lie. Engaged in conversation across the hedge, our worlds intersected. Mine bathed in the hues of a dim night while

hers radiated a brilliant blue.

“Aren’t you coming over?” she tilted her head, her hair glistening with something.

“May I join you?”

“Yes.”

Crossing the threshold into her world beside the spring, I merged with the azure expanse. Once again, I found solace by her side, in the place where I truly belonged.

“You put it on, didn’t you?”

Despite my conflicting emotions, my lips naturally curled into a smile.

Yesterday, I gifted her a hair ornament and attached it to the right side of her head. It featured a prominent star with a few smaller stars trailing along with her hair. I thought it would suit her, but seeing her adorned with the hair ornament surpassed my wildest imagination.

“Yeah, this hair ornament is incredibly cute. Keiichi-kun. Thank you so much.”

In reality, I was the one overwhelmed with gratitude. Words couldn’t express how elated I felt to see her wearing something I had chosen. My heart tightened every time the hair ornament swayed in the wind, mingling with her hair and shimmering. I hadn’t anticipated that she would wear it today.

The small star nestled next to her hair faintly sparkled whenever she glanced at me. It was as though my emotions were being reflected in the twinkling stars.

“It suits you.”

“Really? I’m glad,” she replied.

I wanted to continue gazing at her joyful face, but a hint of embarrassment crept in. I crouched beside her and placed the umbrella I had found into the spring, mirroring her earlier actions. Trying to catch the stars like she had, I failed to do it justice. The stars refused to come together.

“How about you, Saki? Have you ever caught stars before?”

“No, I haven’t,” she answered, her smile gentle.

Had it been a trick of the light that made it seem as though she was scooping up stars earlier?

“As I suspected, you can’t catch them, can you?”

“Yeah... I can’t catch them,” she said with a tinge of disappointment. “This time,” she continued with a hint of determination, “I had truly believed I could catch them. Like catching goldfish or water striders. I even thought I could scoop up the starlight reflected in the spring, but I still can’t do it.”

“If you realized that, why do you continue doing it?”

“Well...” She took a deep breath, exhaling slowly as she gazed at the spring. “I was merely pretending to catch them.”

“What do you mean?”

“I thought that if I played around in the spring like this, he — my restless him — might accidentally find his way here.”

Her words struck me suddenly in the chest.

For her, “he” was her first love.

She had been waiting for him all this time. The reason she lingered by the spring, the reason she played with an umbrella — everything was for him.

“How did you meet him...?”

I knew it would be like driving a large nail into my own heart, but I couldn’t help but ask.

“Meet him?” She looked up at the night sky.

“We first met on the night of the blue moon six years ago.”

“I see.”

“That night, he rescued me here.”

“Rescued you?”

“Yes. I fell into the spring on the night of the blue moon six years ago.”

“What?”

After a pause, I stammered, “Was it... an accident? Or were you playing around?”

“No, it wasn’t either of those. I... intentionally fell,” she replied.

Intentionally? Saki was only eleven years old six years ago. Did that mean she’d wanted to die?

“I’m sorry,” she apologized, sensing my speechlessness.

“You probably don’t want to hear this kind of story, do you?” she asked.

I shook my head, determined to hear her story to the end.

“Can you tell me?” I requested.

And she smiled softly, responding, “Of course.” There was a melancholic undertone in her smile.

“Before coming to Hinata Dormitory, I lived alone with my mother,” she began.

“Mm-hmm.”

“My mother was a single parent for as long as I can remember. She worked tirelessly to provide for me, toiling day and night, yet we remained in poverty. So, she worked even on her days off. Eventually, her health declined, and she fell ill... and she passed away when I was ten years old.”

I struggled to find the right words. Instead, I listened in silence.

“I had no one else to rely on, so I ended up at Hinata Dormitory. It took me a while to adjust, but the dormitory felt warm, and I found the siblings I had always yearned for. The food was delicious, and there were teachers I could trust. I finally felt a sense of relief after being alone for so long.”

“Mm-hmm,” I murmured again.

“Before bidding me farewell at the hospital, my mother held my hand and said, ‘I’ll always be watching over you.’ When I asked her where she would be watching from, she replied, ‘From the moon, the moon that you love dearly, alongside the rabbits while making mochi. I’ll always be watching over you.’ So

every month, I came to the place closest to the moon, and it made me so happy. But even so...”

Her voice quivered, and a gossamer veil coated her eyes. Though her shoulders trembled softly, she mustered the strength to reveal the truth. “But... my new friend from school said she couldn’t play with me anymore. Her mother forbade her from associating with children from the facility.”

“Oh, no...”

“When I heard that, I couldn’t help but think, I’ve had enough. I had been trying so hard but didn’t want to try anymore. Exhausted and lost, I found myself wandering alone in the forest until I stumbled upon this spring.”

“...”

“I saw the reflection of the luminous blue full moon in the spring, and I wondered... if I leaped into that moon within the spring, perhaps I could be transported to the moon adorning the night sky. Maybe, just maybe, I could reunite with my mom, who resides there... That’s what I believed, so I took the plunge into the spring.”

As I listened to her story, my grandmother’s words from yesterday echoed in my mind: *“Hinata Dorm... What kind of place is it? Are the children there all unfortunate?”*

A thought formed within me as I looked at Saki.

The words Saki had spoken to me on my first day at Hinata Dorm lingered in the depths of my consciousness. Perhaps that influenced my perception: *“People around here tend to sneer when they hear about Hinata Dorm.”*

“Everyone says that. That the kids there are pitiful children without parents. They are more prone to problems and delinquency. People look at the children in the facility with that kind of prejudice.”

“Is that not true?” I had asked, unsure of my own opinion. I simply didn’t know.

“That’s not true,” my grandmother had asserted with clarity.

“The children in Hinata Dorm are not pitiful children.”

“...”

“The ones who are pitiful are the adults.”

“Adults?”

“Yes. It’s heartbreaking that adults who can’t raise adorable children are the ones to be pitied.”

“...”

“It’s the responsibility of the adults. The children are not at fault, yet they always suffer. That’s unfair.”

“...”

“Those children are strong. They embrace their loneliness and prepare themselves for independent lives. Those resilient and beautiful children are not pitiful.”

“...”

“We mustn’t be mistaken. If the world were kinder, those children would have an easier life.”

I contemplated the world Saki lived in, a world I couldn’t fully comprehend. The anxiety of children who have been separated from their parents and live without emotional support were undoubtedly immeasurable. That was why these children supported one another to keep going, and some even chose to confine themselves to the limited world they knew just to avoid further pain.

Saki, too, had felt despair in that world, leading her to plunge into the spring on the night of the blue moon six years ago.

“He saved me when I fell into the spring.”

“Yeah.”

“Even though it was our first encounter, he called me Saki. He scolded me, saying, ‘Don’t die.’ And he showed me the purpose of my life. Those words enabled me to keep living until now. He is my savior, my first love, and the reason I’m still alive.”

For her, her first love was not a mere fictional character from a dream. Saki’s love was a genuine, destined love.

“That person was probably in high school. He was backlit by the moonlight, making it difficult to see his face clearly. He was tall, wore a blue shirt, and had a bandage around his pinky finger...

“If he were here with me now, I wonder if he would be like you, Keiichi-kun, the same age as me. We would play and talk together like this, we surely...”

“Surely what?” I inquired.

“Forget it. It’s nothing.”

With those words, she shook her head slightly and turned her gaze toward me. However, Saki didn’t say anything more.

I, too, found myself unable to speak.

Frustration welled up within me, but I came to understand the significance of Saki waiting for that person for six years. The person she was waiting for saved her life.

And even now, waiting for him had become a reason Saki continued to live.

I couldn’t compete with someone like that. In the indigo night, all sounds seemed to fade away. At the edge of the spring, where the wind blew stronger than usual, we forgot our conversation and stared at the swaying blue moon.

We simply gazed at the spring. I wished I could say something clever but didn’t know what. Yet, I didn’t want to let time slip away like this, so, in an attempt to change the mood, I stood up and suggested, “Shall we take a walk?”

Saki rose to her feet next to me and asked, “Where should we go?”

“Should we walk around the spring?” I suggested.

“Or maybe we should go to the forest?” Saki said.

“Yeah, let’s not go there,” I quickly replied.

I decided to wait with Saki for that person. I understood how important blue moon days were to her. And I felt guilty for complaining about it being boring and taking her to town without her consent. Regretting that I had taken up her precious time, I gazed at her. Despite being an honors student, she always prioritized other people’s feelings over her own.

“Okay, then let’s explore around the spring,” Saki suggested.

I thought, *How kind she is.*

As she stood, she exclaimed, “Rock-paper...”

“Huh?” I was taken aback. “Scissors!”

I managed to shout in time with the chant and played rock while she presented paper.

“Okay, we’ll go left.”

“What was the rock-paper-scissors for?” I asked, bewildered.

“The winner decides which way to walk.”

“What kind of game is that?” I shook my shoulders and laughed. I admired her for finding enjoyment in anything. We strolled along the edge of the spring, surrounded by the blue-green hues of the sky and trees.

“It’s my first time seeing the spring from this side,” Saki remarked, casting a sidelong glance at the spring.

“Do you always stay over there?”

The place where Saki always stood was where the blue light shined the brightest. Seeing the spring from this perspective, with the trees obscuring the moonlight, gave it a completely different impression.

“Yeah, that’s right. I’m always there.”

I wondered if that was the spot where she had been saved. Perhaps she always stayed in the same place so her first love wouldn’t get lost.

“But, today...” Saki’s voice trailed off as she looked down at her sneakers.

“What is it?”

“I thought I would be waiting alone today. Honestly, I had given up on the idea that he would come.”

“Who?” I asked, pausing in my steps.

Noticing my halt, Saki also stopped and looked up at me as she spoke.

“Keiichi-kun.”

“Me?”

“Yeah... Yesterday, I said something strange, right? Even though I had never told anyone before, I was able to talk about it with you.”

I realized she might have been worried about sharing something like that. Come to think of it, even after crying at the Suzumushi Temple, she persistently apologized. It seemed like she believed causing trouble for someone was a sin... Saki seemed like the type to think that way.

“Even so, we’re only talking about this now... I’m sorry?”

Saki had called me a good listener before and expressed her desire to talk a lot. I found her chattiness endearing. It seemed like she had opened up to me, which made me happy.

I see... Then, at the very least, I want to be Saki’s number - one confidant, I thought. A friend with whom she could discuss anything. That wouldn’t be so bad. I wanted to listen to all of Saki’s worries.

Even if my feelings didn’t reach her, Saki was still important to me. I looked down at her and said, “I’ll listen to anything.” Then I added, “You don’t have to choose your words or your stories.”

It was me who had said, “*Tell me.*”

“Really?” she asked, suddenly looking up at me.

My chest creaked as if it were breaking apart when I was met with her moist, brown eyes. Pretending not to notice the sound or the pain it caused, I replied, “Yeah. You’ve confided me a lot so far, haven’t you? It’s too late to hold back now.”

“I see.”

“What you told me yesterday, is that what’s been troubling you lately?”

“Yeah.” She nodded.

I couldn’t help but admire the strength of character she displayed. She always seemed to think about others more than herself. Maybe that was just how she lived, but it pained me to think about.

She was likely worried about her future. I was worried about her strength to hide it from others and the fragility concealed beneath.

“I thought I could handle it alone...”

“Yeah.”

“I think about it all the time, even during school and summer vacation. Even when I was in the spring, I kept replaying it in my mind, and I became so anxious that I didn’t know what to do anymore.”

“...”

“So, I’m glad you came and helped me. We had a lot of fun and forgot about our worries. These past four days have been really great.”

Her slender shoulders, flowing hair, slightly parted lips, and eyes filled with sorrow were so dear to me that I wanted to reach out and hug her.

Instead of yearning to physically touch the person I loved, my instinct was to provide comfort to the girl who worked tirelessly and carried the weight of anxiety for her future. It reminded me of the tender moment when she’d run her fingers through my hair and whispered, “Hmm... Good boy, good boy.”

Yet, I knew it was important for a man to exercise caution when it came to physical contact with a girl, so I tightened my outstretched hand, keeping it from reaching her. Hoping my words would convey the support I wanted to offer, I spoke gently. “Saki, did you know that worries are like tomatoes?”

“Tomatoes?” she asked, her curiosity piqued.

“Yes, it’s something my grandmother taught me. Worries are like tomato plants.”

That was back when I was just an elementary school student, taking my first steps into the world of soccer. I had a small body, and no matter how much I practiced, I couldn’t seem to improve as fast as my classmates.

Watching them progress quickly filled me with envy. While I sat on the bench, cheering them on, I couldn’t help but feel frustrated. I practiced diligently, even more than they did, yet progress eluded me. I started to question if I should give it up since I wasn’t seeing any results. But despite my doubts, my love for soccer

persisted. I was torn between my passion and desire to be a good kid. I felt unable to confide in my mother, friends, or teacher about my worries. They kept growing inside me, consuming my thoughts during class, breaks, and even holidays. My heart felt on the verge of exploding.

I yearned for someone to notice my struggles, but it seemed no one could see through my facade. The only person who recognized my distress was my grandmother. During a summer visit to Kyoto, she'd approached me quietly and asked, "What's wrong? You look like you're about to cry."

Finding solace in her presence, I'd poured out my worries about soccer. Despite my effort, I couldn't improve. Thoughts of quitting plagued my mind, but my love for the game kept me entangled in indecision.

Then, my grandmother imparted her wisdom, saying, "*Keiichi, worries are like tomato plants.*"

"A tomato plant?" I'd asked Grandma, intrigued.

"Yes. *Have you ever grown tomatoes, Keiichi?*"

"Tomatoes? Yes, I have. *We grew them in my second-year life science class.*"

"How did it go? *If you simply watered them, they would grow easily, right?*"

"Indeed."

"*But the more you worry, the more you water the tomato plant within you. It thrives on your worries, growing larger and larger, while the space in your heart diminishes, leading to suffering.*"

Silence lingered as I absorbed her words.

"Kids like you, Keiichi, who try their best, often overthink and dwell on these matters. As a result, the worry tree receives an abundance of water, expanding relentlessly, and the space in their heart shrinks, causing them pain."

Puzzled, I'd asked, "So, what should I do?"

"You should allocate worry time only once a day," she advised. "And you shouldn't bear the burden alone. Share your worries with someone who will eat tomatoes with you."

"Like... Grandma?"

“I’m glad you thought of that. I’m honored to be the one you chose as someone who can worry with you. Please let me consume the tomatoes grown from that worry tree.”

Her words had brought me immense relief.

Every night, my grandmother had devoured the tomatoes nourished by the worry tree within me. I no longer had to dwell on my concerns except during those precious moments I shared with her. The mere thought of this process brought me immense comfort.

I had realized then that reducing the time I spent dwelling on my worries made me feel less burdened. Furthermore, even if my worries multiplied, I began to trust that it would be alright since Grandma would devour them. This newfound conviction empowered me to persevere, even if I couldn’t excel immediately, hoping to eventually become a regular player.

And then, it had dawned on me that I had been taking things too seriously.

“When I return to Tokyo, I’ll find someone else who can eat the tomatoes instead of you, okay?”

And so, I found him — Yuuya, my best friend, the one I could confide in about anything. Without him, I often wondered what would have become of me. Perhaps I would have remained trapped in suffering, unable to forge friendships or open up to my parents, leading a life of solitude. But thanks to Yuuya, my outlook changed, and I found the support I needed to navigate life’s challenges.

I recounted the tale of the tomato plant to Saki, and her eyes welled up with tears. She asked, her voice trembling, “Will you eat it with me?”

Without a moment’s hesitation, I replied, “Of course.” And together, we savored the big, ripe tomatoes, their sweetness filling our mouths.

“No one has ever said anything like that to me before about a tomato plant,” Saki whispered, her voice filled with gratitude.

“You’re trying too hard, Saki. It’s okay to rely on others more,” I assured her gently.

Tears continued to stream down her face, and I reached out to wipe them away with my finger. As the tears glistened with a faint blue light, resembling precious gems, I said softly, "We're still children, you know."

We had both grown up too quickly, striving to meet the expectations of adults while neglecting the aspects of growth that truly mattered. Perhaps it was our shared immaturity that drew us together that summer. Maybe Saki needed me, and I needed her.

"You know, I really..." Saki began, taking a deep breath before sharing her true feelings. "I don't want to go to the new facility. I want to go to the foster family who has been waiting for me. The Suzukis. That's their name. They've been patiently waiting for me ever since I first entered the facility. Even though I refused to go, they didn't accept any other children and insisted on waiting for me."

It was because Saki was Saki. I understood Suzuki-san's sentiments all too well. Saki's transparent nature and her remarkable intelligence left a lasting impression on me. Her strength and fragility intertwined, forming the very core of her kindness. She was a truly special presence in my life.

"I sometimes eat and stay over at Suzuki-san's house. They waited for me so long that they've become like grandparents to me, but I love Suzuki-san..." Saki's voice quivered as tears rolled down her brown, cat-like eyes. The weight of her emotions overwhelmed her, and this was the most she had ever cried.

"It seems like you've already found your answer," I whispered softly. Saki had just found the courage to put her feelings into words, a significant step for someone who rarely expressed their true emotions, especially a child.

Surprised by her newfound voice, she continued to cry, her tears flowing even more freely. "But... if I were to have a family, wouldn't my mother be sad? It doesn't seem right to be the only one happy... does it?"

"I don't know..." I responded, following her gaze to the starry night sky. A full blue moon hung in the center, surrounded by sparkling stars. It felt as though there were a silhouette of a person within the moon. Saki's mother on the moon must have possessed the same gentleness, cheerfulness, and captivating smile as Saki. Their smiles must have resembled each other greatly.

“Is Suzuki-san someone who will eat tomatoes with you?” I inquired gently.

“Um... yes, definitely,” she replied, her voice filled with conviction.

“Would Saki’s mother truly be unhappy about her child’s happiness?” I asked, probing further.

“No, that wouldn’t be right,” she murmured, tears flowing.

“Your mother wishes for your happiness,” I affirmed.

Silence enveloped us as Saki processed my words. “It would be the greatest happiness to have two mothers,” she said, tears streaming.

“Saki, please be honest with me as well,” I implored, my heart yearning for her true happiness.

Please, I silently prayed.

“Be happy.”

My wish was not for my own feelings to be fulfilled. It was for Saki’s radiant smile to blossom from deep within her heart.

Life can be cruel sometimes, and we all have to navigate our paths through its unpredictable terrain. We have to embrace everything that came our way and keep moving forward. But I firmly believed that light awaited us, even in the darkest moments.

“Keiichi-kun, thank you.” Saki looked up at me, tears still clinging to her face.

I gently tousled her hair and let out a soft laugh, trying to hide the turmoil within. No, it wasn’t good. This was the end. Today marked the last day I could spend with Saki.

As that realization struck me, I instinctively pulled Saki, her eyes red from crying, closer to me and embraced her tightly. I felt her bury her face in my chest, seeking solace and comfort.

My fingers found their way into her hair, which swayed gently as I cradled her delicate head and whispered, “I’m the one who should be thanking you. I’m so grateful that we crossed paths.”

The ethereal blue light of the moon stretched thin, eventually fading away from the moonlit water's surface. The shimmering reflection of the moon on the water dissipated as the once-in-a-few-years blue moon approached its end.

In this blue-tinged world, I decided to leave my love for her. It would remain a faint love, nurtured alongside the blue moon and find its closure on this night.

FINAL CHAPTER

“Bye, Grandma,” I said, my voice filled with a mixture of gratitude and sadness.

“Take care of yourself, dear mother-in-law,” my mother added, her tone affectionate.

“Well then, when will I come next? Let me see... I don’t know yet. I’ll contact you, Mom,” my father chimed in, the uncertainty in his voice hinting at the bittersweetness of our departure.

Silence hung in the air for a moment, and then my gaze met Grandma’s. We stood face to face in the spacious entrance of her house, suitcases in my hand. Our height difference was almost negligible, allowing our eyes to connect directly. I could see the clarity in Grandma’s expression, as if she understood the words I couldn’t bring myself to say.

Grandma broke the silence. “Keiichi, thank you. I had a wonderful time.”

“Grandma... is it alright?” I managed to utter, my voice barely above a whisper. “To go back alone,” I added, hoping she could decipher the unspoken words behind my question.

Grandma’s gentle smile seemed to absorb all my anxiety and confusion. She nodded and reassured me, “It’s alright. Come visit me again.”

Grandma loved Kyoto, which was why she chose to stay here instead of moving to Tokyo with us. I had come to accept my parents’ decision not to insist on Grandma accompanying us. I had learned to cherish Grandma’s own desires. Yet, a sense of loneliness lingered within me.

I scribbled my phone number on a memo pad on the entrance table and handed it to Grandma. “Feel free to contact me anytime,” I said with sincerity.

“Keiichi, thank you,” Grandma replied, her voice warm and appreciative.

“Yeah,” was all I could manage to say, my emotions too complex to put into words.

As we prepared to leave, our family bid farewell to Grandma one by one. Father was the first to say goodbye, followed by my sister, then my mother, and finally, it was my turn. We left the house, Grandma standing at the front, watching us as we made our way toward the town.

“There’s a taxi stand down the slope,” my father mentioned, breaking the silence.

“Should we buy some souvenirs on the way back?” my mother suggested, trying to lighten the mood.

“That’s a good idea,” my sister agreed, her voice filled with enthusiasm.

While my parents discussed their plans, I gazed up at the clear sky, not a single cloud in sight. The air around me felt refreshing, and I took a deep breath, slipping my hands into my pockets as we descended the gentle slope.

Goodbye, Kyoto.

Goodbye, Saki.

*

“Keiichi, Keiichi,” Yuuya called out, trying to regain my attention.

“Oh, sorry,” I apologized, realizing my mind had wandered off.

Everyday life resumed after returning to Tokyo. I went to soccer practice and spent my days off with Yuuya, following the same routine as before. It was now late August, and as I found myself caught up in the familiar rhythm of ordinary days, the summer vacation of my second year of high school was coming to an end.

“What are we buying again?” I asked Yuuya, trying to bring my focus back to the present. Today, I was accompanying him on a shopping trip to Shimokitazawa. Sakura’s birthday was approaching, and he wanted to find the perfect gift for her. However, he seemed unsure of what to buy and didn’t want

to venture into stores that a man would typically avoid alone. So, he asked me to join him.

“I wouldn’t want to go in alone either,” I admitted, understanding his sentiment.

Initially, I had declined his invitation, but I thought it might be better than leaving Yuuya, who was built like a giant bear, to navigate the stores alone. Besides, I had no other plans, so it could be a good way to pass the time.

As it turned out, my decision was justified. Yuuya seemed incapable of making up his mind or even deciding where to start. We found ourselves wandering aimlessly in front of a colorful miscellaneous goods store, its vibrant items ranging from pink to red. I couldn’t help but think that Sakura would appreciate this shop’s ambiance.

“Sakura always comes here alone,” Yuuya remarked when I mentioned it.

“What do you do while she’s inside?” I asked, curious about his routine.

“I wait outside,” he replied matter-of-factly.

Ah, I could easily envision that scene.

“Is there anything you want to get at this shop?” I inquired.

“I didn’t say I wanted something, but I did say I liked it,” he replied, his cluelessness evident.

“What kind of thing?” I pressed.

“I don’t know,” he admitted sheepishly.

“You didn’t even do any research beforehand?” I chuckled, amazed by his usual clumsiness.

Yuuya stayed silent, seeming to accept my scolding. I thought, *If Yuuya doesn’t know, there’s no way I’ll know.* Just then, someone called my name.

“Huh? Kei-kun?” I heard a familiar voice and turned toward it. “And... Yuuya?”

Two girls emerged from the store, and I recognized one of them as Sakura.

“O-o-o-o-oh. Hey, Sakura. What a coincidence,” I stammered, laughing and observing Yuuya’s suspicious behavior.

At that moment, I felt an intense gaze directed at my right cheek. When I followed the gaze, I found the other girl beside Sakura staring intently at me. Our eyes met, and she blushed, quickly lowering her gaze while her ears turned crimson.

“Are you okay?” I asked, concerned by her reaction.

“Yeah... I was just taken by surprise,” she replied, her voice slightly shaky.

Sakura and the girl exchanged whispers before the girl peered at me from under her bangs. Our eyes met again; this time, her blush deepened, surpassing its previous intensity. Observing her, a realization dawned upon me.

Could it be that this girl... is the one Sakura mentioned before, the one who harbors feelings for me?

The girl, who kept her gaze down, exuded style and trendiness. Her attire resembled that of a fashion magazine model. Head to toe, she seemed perfectly put together.

Initially, I thought she fit the mold of a typical “girly” girl that I was acquainted with. However, in that moment, my mind projected an image of Saki — a simple T-shirt and jeans, her black hair cascading gracefully around her shoulders, reflecting the moonlight.

Beside her scuffed sneakers were smaller, whiter sneakers that contrasted with mine. Standing by the edge of a spring, she possessed an indescribable beauty, one that captivated me even without any adornment or trend-chasing.

As I woke up each morning, it was akin to discovering a morning glory flower adorned with dewdrops or witnessing the faint light of a star that had traveled hundreds of light years to reach me in the present moment. The enchantment of her presence lingered, even without embellishment or the pursuit of passing trends.

On that summer night in Kyoto, I wondered where the stunning girl who had appeared before me was now. I hoped she'd safely made it to her foster home. I couldn't help but wonder if she still enjoyed eating tomatoes every night. I hoped she occasionally wore that hair accessory I remembered so vividly.

Recalling her smile, her presence, the way her hair flowed, and her voice, my chest began to warm, making it difficult to catch my breath. But my thoughts were interrupted by Sakura's voice.

"Kei-kun?"

Sakura's voice brought me back to reality, and I realized that Yuuya, standing beside her, was giving me a stern glare. It was as if he was silently warning me not to say anything that might hurt Sakura, reminding me of my criminal record.

I took in the weight of his unspoken message and responded calmly, "What?"

"Have you had lunch yet?" Sakura asked.

"Not yet, but..." I started to reply, but Yuuya's intense gaze made me falter.

"Then, let's eat together," he suggested firmly.

Yuuya's gaze was so intense that I couldn't help but nod in agreement.

We walked along a residential alley and stumbled upon a small, stylish, and cute café that would appeal to girls.

"How about this place?" Sakura asked.

"Sure," Yuuya replied, and we entered the shop. We decided to order the four recommended lunches.

As I looked at the cute food on unnecessarily large plates, I couldn't help but think I just wanted a simple bowl of rice. Maybe I should have suggested a beef bowl for lunch instead. However, I kept my thoughts to myself, knowing Yuuya would disapprove.

I never expected Yuuya, who was an even bigger eater than me, to be satisfied with such a small portion. But he seemed to be enjoying it. Watching him, I couldn't help but smile wryly. In the past, I wouldn't have been able to understand how Yuuya felt.

I'd thought Yuuya was kind for accommodating Sakura's preferences, but I would still wonder why he go to such lengths? Why wouldn't he order a beef bowl for himself?

But now, I thought I understood. When you like someone, you want to share and enjoy what they love, even if it's not your preference. *If seeing her smile happily over a lunch like this, which is n't really my style, is worth it, then it doesn't feel like a big sacrifice after all.*

The emotions that captivated my heart were tied to Saki. I shook my head slightly, realizing there was no continuation of the summer love I had experienced. My one-sided love had ended with the passing of the blue moon. If I continue to dwell on it, it would only bring more pain. So, I had to let go of these feelings soon. I had to forget.

With that determination, I focused on shoveling the food into my mouth. The three of them continued chatting, and I absentmindedly listened while glancing around the café. It was crowded with people, ranging from high school students like us to college students, office ladies, and salarymen. Few people were dining alone, and everyone seemed to be enjoying lunch with someone else while holding their smartphones.

Although this should have been a familiar sight, I felt a sense of discomfort. It was because I'd never seen this kind of scene at the Starbucks by Kamogawa River in Kyoto. No one had a smartphone there. Was it because it was a special café where people could savor the scenery and the breeze from the riverbed? Or perhaps everyone simply valued their time differently. The contrast left me with a lingering sense of unease.

Walking down the covered arcade of Shinkyōgoku, I couldn't help but notice that almost everyone passing by was using flip phones. I leaned over to whisper to Yuuya, who was sitting next to me, reminiscing about the scenery I had seen in Kyoto.

"Hey, is it always like this?" I asked, pointing at the people around us.

"What do you mean?" Yuuya replied, confused.

"I mean, smartphones," I clarified.

"Of course, what are you talking about?" he responded nonchalantly.

Right, this is our normal everyday scene.

After lunch, I was invited to hang out with the three of them, but I declined, citing something I had to do. No one scolded me or questioned my decision. I thought it was because of the answer I gave to Sakura's friend's question at the café earlier.

"Keiichi, do you have someone you like?" she had asked.

I had taken a deep breath before responding, knowing that my answer would make her blush more than anything else today.

"Yeah, I do," I admitted.

"I see..." she replied.

"But I recently went through a breakup. I don't think I'll be able to fall in love again for a while," I confessed honestly.

Nobody said anything in response. With a wave of my hand, I bade them farewell, and Yuuya chimed in, *"I'll go back too."* And now, he was walking next to me along the embankment.

The setting sun had painted the sky and surrounding area in shades of red. Wispy, torn clouds of pale pink were scattered across the sky. The evening breeze carried the scent of fresh greenery from the short-cut grass. People were jogging, walking their dogs, and young mothers were pushing baby carriages along the embankment. Lively voices could be heard from the playground below, where children in white uniforms were practicing baseball.

"I'm sorry," Yuuya murmured, his gaze absentmindedly on the scenery as we walked.

"What's wrong?" I asked, observing his profile.

"For making you say those things," he replied without looking at me.

A month ago, I'd received a message asking how our date had gone, but I didn't reply. Without blaming me or pressing further, Yuuya sensed that something was off with me and took me shopping. It was his kindness. And yet, I'd ended up confessing my rejection in front of everyone.

I didn't think Yuuya had wanted me to do that. He was a big guy with rough movements but also gentle. Sakura must have been drawn to that side of him.

“Getting rejected doesn’t mean you need a new love. You’re different,” he said.

“Yeah,” I replied.

The vermilion sky was beginning to transition into a light purple hue. Even in this world of violet, the one person I remembered most vividly was Saki.

I had thought my feelings would easily fade if I were separated from her. I imagined my love locked up in a small box, withering and dying without sunlight or water. That’s what I had believed, but... no matter where I went or what I did, thoughts of her consumed me.

My daily life, as I remembered her, was filled with brightness, but when my thoughts were interrupted and I couldn’t see her, my daily life instantly lost its color, leaving me feeling alone in a sepia-toned space.

Questions plagued my mind as I longed to see Saki, the girl I still had feelings for. Where was she now? Did she stay in Kyoto or move far away to her foster parents’ home? Since she didn’t have a cell phone, I had no means of contacting her. I wondered if she was happy in her new life.

Even though I knew the sky wouldn’t answer my inquiries, I found myself pondering while gazing at the faintly floating white moon in the violet sky.

“What kind of girl was she?” Yuuya suddenly asked, breaking the usual norm of avoiding such questions that could reopen the wounds of a broken heart. It seemed like he genuinely wanted to know. I wanted to share with Yuuya the story of my beloved girlfriend, whose mere existence filled my heart with overwhelming love.

“She was cute, beautiful,” I began, struggling to find the right words. “But it’s not just that. She was kind, reliable, but...”

“But?”

“She cared more about others than herself.”

“Just like you.”

“No, I’m not that good,” I responded, realizing I often placed myself above others. It was her selfless and genuine compassion that had drawn me to her. Her love extended far and wide, just like Grandma’s.

Oh, *what should I do?* Every time I thought of her, my love, locked away in a closed box, trembled and yearned to be set free. The swelling emotions threatened to break the lid, surging through my chest and causing my eyes to well up.

It seemed like the sky was on the verge of shedding tears.

“Anything else about her?” Yuuya probed further.

“Mmm... she likes soccer. She knows a lot about it,” I shared, attempting to divert the rising intensity of my emotions by revealing an unexpected aspect of Saki.

“Oh, that’s cool,” Yuuya responded, showing genuine interest.

“She’s a passionate fan of Purple Sanga.”

“What’s Purple Sanga?” Yuuya questioned.

“Huh?”

“Isn’t it Kyoto Sanga?”

Ah, I assumed she was a Kyoto Sanga fan. But Saki always referred to it differently...

“I wonder if they won. Today is Purple Sanga’s game day.”

“Do you have a favorite team?”

“Kyoto Purple Sanga.”

She said it with such clarity. I had been mistaken because the locals referred to it differently.

“Come to think of it, wasn’t Kyoto Sanga called Kyoto Purple Sanga in the past?”

“...”

“Well, when we started following soccer, they had already changed their name to Kyoto Sanga, so maybe those familiar with the old name still refer to it as Purple Sanga.”

A sense of discomfort washed over me. Saki's way of speaking wasn't merely a nostalgic reminiscence. She had distinctly said Purple Sanga.

"Keiichi, watch out!" Yuuya's loud voice suddenly startled me, and I saw something hurtling toward me. I tried to dodge it, but my body only managed to tilt diagonally.

"Oh, no!"

The world spun around me as I slid down the steep slope, finally coming to a stop below the embankment.

"Sorry!"

As I lay there on the ground, covered in grass and dirt, a group of boys in white uniforms gathered before me. Their faces displayed a mixture of panic and concern. It finally became clear what had flown in front of me — a baseball.

"Are you okay?" one of the boys asked, worry in his voice.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Don't worry, just keep practicing," I reassured them, offering a smile despite the pain.

"We're really sorry."

"Thank you very much."

The boys quickly took off their baseball caps, bowed apologetically, retrieved the ball, and swiftly ran away. I called out to them, their small figures receding into the distance. "Good luck, boys!"

A sharp pain shot through my little finger as I attempted to stand up, causing me to wince in discomfort. "Ow."

"I think it's broken."

"You're stupid, big brother."

"Shut up."

When I arrived home and saw my swollen pinky finger, I was immediately taken to the hospital. It was revealed that my finger was indeed broken.

"Could easily breaking a bone mean you have a calcium deficiency?"

Not wanting to hear my sister's annoying comments, I headed up the stairs and entered my room. I casually turned on the TV, but only the news was on. Since I wasn't interested, I sat at my desk and gazed into space.

After a few news segments, the announcer on TV mentioned, "Today is the second blue moon."

Ah, so the next blue moon has already arrived.

I stood up and approached the window. The full moon visible through the window had a faint bluish tint.

It truly was a blue moon.

I shifted my gaze to the small box on my desk and slowly opened the lid, revealing a tiny star inside.

On the final day of the first blue moon, I'd embraced Saki by the fountain. While cradling her small head, my finger had slipped into her silky hair. Then, when I gently let her go, a thin thread attached to a small star hidden in her hair broke and remained on my fingertip.

It wasn't until I returned to Grandma's house that night that I'd realized it. I couldn't bring myself to throw away that small star. I'd brought it back to Tokyo and placed it in a small box I happened to find.

"You wanted to be by Saki's side, too, didn't you?" I murmured to the glittering star in the box.

Before we knew it, summer vacation was over, and school had started. The first day consisted of a shortened schedule, with only half a day of activities, including an opening ceremony. From today, the second day, real school life began.

Although my classmates, who had also finished their summer vacation, seemed familiar, they appeared a bit more grown-up. In one corner of the classroom, various summer memories were shared, such as "I got a boyfriend" or "The summer festival we went to together was so fun."

Certainly, envy shined in my eyes. It was heartening to know that the innocent love I experienced during the summer still continued.

After several hours of soccer practice, I changed out of my sweaty T-shirt into a blue one and boarded the bus.

“It’s been a while since I last rode a bus.”

“Really? I ride it every day.”

“That’s nice.”

“No, it’s not.”

I closed my eyes and allowed the bus’s movement to sway me, recalling the memories etched into my mind from summer. Holding a strap, I looked out the window and saw a faint moon hanging in the sky, casting a dim light. It was a full moon. And today, just like before, it was blue.

As the bus slowed to a stop, I looked up at the sky and saw the blue moon spreading its blue glow across the darkness. I was well acquainted with this blue light and the big blue full moon. Come to think of it, on the day I broke my right little finger, the announcer on TV had said, “Today is the second blue moon.” So, today was the fourth day of the second blue moon. Once today was over, would the second blue moon also be over?

When I saw the blue moon, the figure of Saki standing by the spring came to mind. Even though Saki was unlikely to come to that spring again, my heart still worried about her.

Was she standing alone by the spring? Was she crying alone? Even though someone had come to eat Saki’s tomatoes, I still worried because I remembered the faint blue painting Saki drew at Hinata Dormitory.

In the painting, a small girl standing in front of the spring was looking up at the blue moon. That little girl must have been Saki in elementary school. I didn’t know if it was the Saki from before she threw herself into the spring or the Saki who had been waiting for him to rescue her, but I had never been able to forget that painting.

It had always been a strange memory, as if from a past life, and it still captivated my heart.

The blue moonlight easily brought back memories of the time we spent together and the feelings I harbored then. Saki using an umbrella to scoop up stars at the spring, Saki looking up at the moon with a trembling voice, Saki showing interest in the poster of the Yokai Train, and Saki saying that the cherry blossoms that hadn't bloom were beautiful.

Every Saki was charming and cute. I wanted to keep listening to her stories, and I wanted to stay by her side forever. My chest hurt. I thought I was stupid for wishing for this love to disappear along with the blue moon.

Even though I wouldn't be able to fall in love with anyone else again, Saki was more special to me than anyone; my destined one, but...

Did this mean that the program embedded in my brain, heart, and body to find my destined person was wrong? Did it mean that I would find someone in the future I liked more?

I shook my head. No one could make me fall in love more than Saki; not now, not in the future, not ever.

I walked through the quiet residential area, and after a while, I arrived at my house. I went upstairs to my room, closed the door with a click, and walked straight to the small box on my desk. I gently reached out and opened the lid.

The small star inside the box shone brightly, like always. Suddenly, I felt like I could see her crying face in the midst of the shining stars illuminated by the blue moonlight.

Come to think of it, Saki had cried when she saw the star ornament I gave her. Like a child who forgot how to speak, she kept repeating, "Why?" and crying in front of the happy Jizo statue at Suzumushi Temple.

Why had she cried? And why did she say, "Even if it was just a coincidence, it made me happy?"

I felt like I'd forgotten something important that I had to remember in order to live my life. It was a strange feeling, similar to guilt.

Every time I recalled my memories with her, I felt this sense of discomfort. Something was not right. I needed to remember...

Why had the corridor in Arashiyama Station displayed kimonos in the daytime but not at night? Why had it been raining in the forest where Saki was during the day but not in the town where I was? Why wasn't anyone using a smartphone?

I pondered it all but couldn't unravel the mystery. Then, my gaze fell on my suitcase in the corner of the room. I approached it and unzipped it, discovering a forgotten sticker-type photo inside. It was a picture I had taken with Saki in Kyoto, intending to give it to her as a keepsake. However, I had accidentally bumped into someone and forgotten about it.

Saki always wore a kind and cheerful smile in front of everyone, but in that purikura... *Why?*

Lost in thought, I called my grandma. I had a feeling only she could provide clarity on this unsettling feeling.

"Hello?" After the fourth ring, my grandma finally answered.

"Keiichi? I've been waiting for your call."

"Waiting for me? Were you lonely?"

"That too, but did you call today because you wanted to know something important?"

"Yeah."

Grandma had already sensed something. I mustered the courage to ask. My grip tightened on the purikura. "Grandma, is the legend of the blue moon you told me true?"

Back then, I had dismissed her words as onset dementia, not taking them seriously. But if what she had said about the legend was true, I could finally grasp something.

"Yes, it is."

After a moment of silence, Grandma said softly, "Where the blue light of the blue moon guides, there lies an entrance to the past."

Her words provided an answer to my half-hearted musings, leaving me speechless.

“Keiichi, did you visit there this summer?”

“How did you know?”

“Because six years ago, during the four days of the blue moon, you would come home to me at night.”

“What?” What did she mean?

“By harnessing the power of the blue moon, one can travel back to the past, only when the blue moonlight shines. Returning to the present naturally in the morning is customary. When you came visit me six years ago in July, you were an eleven-year-old elementary school student. But on the night of the blue moon in August, you appeared as a seventeen-year-old high school student, which surprised me greatly.”

“...”

“High school student you sat on the veranda, gazing at the full blue moon, and asked me, ‘Do you know about the blue moon?’ That’s how I found out.”

“...”

“Future Keiichi borrowed the power of the blue moon and traveled six years in the past.”

Grandma’s unbelievable words sent a tremor through my hand, making me clutch the purikura. But it had to be the reality I needed to accept. The purikura, unseen for a month, had faded in color over the course of six years. The date and time indicated on it were from August 3, six years ago.

Amidst my confusion, I struggled to comprehend the reality. “*You can only travel to the past when the blue moon shines.*” If that story was true, everything made sense — the absence of smartphones in Kyoto, Saki referring to Kyoto Sanga as Purple Sanga, and the vanishing Kimono Forest at night. My heart raced and breathing became difficult, but I couldn’t stop my thoughts. I felt an overwhelming need to continue.

I recollected Grandma’s words. “*Where the light of the blue moon leads, there lies an entrance to the past*” If the blue light of the full moon guided me somewhere, it

must have led me to the forest. Therefore, the entrance to the past lay within that forest. But why did I have to venture into the past?

“Grandma, why did I have to go to the past?”

The question haunting my mind slipped out. Inadvertently, I had stumbled into the past. Was it a prank by God? Or...?

“Are the people who can travel back to the past predetermined?” I asked gently, seeking clarification from my grandma.

“People who can travel back to the past are either those who strongly desire to go to that world or those who need to go to that world,” she explained.

My thoughts struggled to keep pace. Yet, it had to be true. I desperately tried to grasp the meaning behind my grandma’s words. The flow of time in this world was not strictly one-way.

I, who had not yearned strongly to revisit the past, must have unwittingly journeyed there for the latter reason.

“Why did I have to go six years in the past?” I questioned, my confusion mounting. No matter how much I contemplated it, the answer eluded me. I had no clue.

“Was it difficult? I’m sorry,” Grandma empathized with my silence.

“No, it’s not that,” I replied, trying to compose myself.

“Why you went to the past is something I don’t understand. Only you knows the answer,” she gently explained.

Only I know?

“There’s one more thing I can tell you now,” she continued, taking a deep breath. I braced myself for what was to come. “There is only one more opportunity to return to the past.”

“Really?”

“Yes, that’s correct. Didn’t I mention that the blue moon occurs twice a month? Hence, there are two chances to travel back in time. Those who ventured into the past during the first blue moon cannot revisit the past unless

it coincides with the blue moon of that particular month. So, if you desires to return to the past again, today is the sole opportunity.”

The power of the blue moon resides within the four days of the spring tide when the moon is full. Today marked the fourth day of the second full moon. Therefore, today was the only chance to travel back to the past.

I closed my eyes and delved into deep thought. Why did I become entangled in that world six years ago and fallen in love with Saki? What had drawn me to her, a love as vast and profound as my grandmother’s? I had to remember. What had she said?

When we first met near the spring, and she unexpectedly appeared in the forest, her eyes had widened with surprise as if she had seen a ghost upon seeing my face. I’d said, “*I’m not.*”

At that moment, hadn’t she responded, “*Oh, okay. I thought you looked like somebody else*”?

And then, on the last day of the blue moon, the night she confided in me about her first love, she mentioned, “*That person was probably in high school. He was backlit by the moonlight, making it difficult to see his face clearly. He was tall, wore a blue shirt, and had a bandage around his pinky finger...*”

Hadn’t she explained it like that?

Blinded by my first intense experience of love, I failed to notice the subtle inconsistencies. I never fathomed that I had wandered into that world from six years ago. However, after Saki’s departure, along with the unsettling feeling, the truth had unraveled. She must have believed I was the person she had a crush on as soon as she saw me. Yet, when I declared, “I’m not,” she must have clung to those words.

And now, I wore a blue T-shirt. A bandage was wrapped around my little finger... It matched the description of the “he” she had spoken about. I was the only one capable of rescuing Saki, who had fallen into the spring all alone .

I must be the first love she had been yearning for.

“*There is only one more opportunity to return to the past,*” Grandma’s words reverberated in my mind.

Once the blue moonlight no longer reached Earth, the entrance to the past would close.

What would become of Saki, who had fallen into the spring, if I couldn't go back to the past?

I glanced at the clock, swiftly grabbed the small box from the desk, and rushed out of the room. I ran down the stairs, my heart pounding with urgency, and burst into the living room where my sister was lounging on the sofa and my mother was busy in the kitchen. They both stared at me, taken aback by my sudden entrance.

"Mom, can you lend me some money?" I blurted, desperation in my voice.

"Keiichi, what's the matter? Why do you need money all of a sudden?" my mother asked, clearly confused by my frantic request.

"I promise I'll pay you back. It's for something important, a crucial opportunity. Please, I need the money for the shinkansen to Kyoto," I pleaded, my words tumbling out in a rush.

My mother's initial surprise transformed into a momentary furrowed brow as she contemplated my request. Then, with an understanding expression, she nodded and reached for her wallet.

"Okay," she said, pulling out several ten thousand-yen bills.

My sister, Akane, chimed in with a hint of concern, questioning the amount. "Is it really okay to lend him that much?"

"It's fine. Keiichi has never asked me for anything like this before. It must be something important. I've always relied on him, so I can do this much for him," my mother replied, her words instilling a sense of appreciation within me.

Despite the loneliness I had endured, her acknowledgement of my efforts filled me with joy. Grateful, I responded with heartfelt gratitude before rushing out of the house, money in hand.

I had to hurry; time was of the essence if I wanted to return to the past. The image of young Saki, just eleven years old, waiting for me at that spring propelled me forward.

I managed to stop a bus about to depart, quickly boarded it, and made my way to Tokyo Station. From there, I leaped onto the shinkansen, clutching the star fragment she had left behind.

Hurry, hurry, I urged myself silently, gripping the small star tightly in my hand, pouring my wishes into it as the train raced toward Kyoto Station.

“The next stop is Kyoto Station,” the announcement chimed as the shinkansen slowed. Concealing the star fragment within a bandage, I positioned myself near the train’s door, preparing to bolt as soon as it opened.

Thoughts raced through my mind. What would happen if I failed to arrive in time to harness the power of the blue moon and return to the past? Would Saki’s fate be irreparably altered? In the worst case, would she vanish from existence altogether?

As soon as the shinkansen came to a halt at Kyoto Station, I dashed off to the bus stop. I checked the schedule and found that the last bus to Arashiyama Station, where I usually alighted, had already departed. Seeking guidance, I approached a station attendant and asked about the route to Arashiyama. Boarding the subway and making a transfer, I eventually reached Arashiyama Station, sprinting again toward my destination.

As I ran through the dimly lit gravel road, the Togetsukyō and Oi River bridges came into view. The pale blue moonlight bathed the surroundings, casting an ethereal glow upon the bridges. The starry sky above remained breathtaking, with the faint reflection of the blue moon shimmering at its center. Yet, I couldn’t help but notice that the blue hue of the moon was fading.

The urgency to return to the past intensified. If I didn’t make it in time, Saki’s fate would be in jeopardy. With gritted teeth, I pushed myself through the misty blue world, struggling to find my way through the unfamiliar forest.

Unlike my experience during the first blue moon, I was disoriented and lost. The blue light that had guided me before seemed absent this time. It took me more than double the usual time to reach the forest and penetrate the dense thicket. The wind had changed, carrying a different scent, and the path that should have been there had vanished.

Over the past six years, the mountain path I once walked had succumbed to nature's reclamation. The absence of children from the dormitory had stripped the forest of its vibrancy, leaving it to grow undisturbed. Relying on my memory, I forged ahead, pushing through the tangle of overlapping trees in search of the spring.

I noticed that the forest's colors had shifted. The vibrant blue light I had witnessed just a month ago now struggled to reach the ground. Looking up at the night sky, I saw a veil of white clouds obscuring the full moon. If this veil were to blanket everything, the blue light would fade away, severing my connection to Saki forever.

"Where is it?" I shouted in frustration, desperately searching for the spring. I ignored the pain of tree branches scraping my hands and feet, determined to reach Saki as quickly as possible.

Despite my persistent exploration, I couldn't find the entrance to the past. I had hoped returning to this forest would naturally transport me back in time, just like during the first blue moon, but now, I remained firmly entrenched in the present. The extended leaves, the altered wind, and the transformed forest — all existed in their current state.

Where should I go to find Saki? Where was the entrance to the past? No matter where I looked, the forest remained unchanged. The wind blew, and the leaves rustled, but their touch felt cold, devoid of any connection to the past.

"Saki..." I called out her name almost involuntarily. A faint elongated blue hue flickered intermittently in the grayish scenery beyond my voice. *Could it be...?*

Guided by the flickering blue shade, I pressed on. Slowly, my field of vision expanded, and there it was — the spring. Finally, I found it.

Crossing the overgrown vegetation and approaching the edge of the spring, memories flooded my mind. The trees surrounding the spring, where we had spent so much time together, had grown wild, their branches intertwining. Even the wooden board she had used to scoop up stars had succumbed to decay over the past six years.

I arrived at the familiar corner of the spring, where she always used to be, but nothing happened. I had no idea how to return to the past. This world seemed

too dark, with the blue light unable to penetrate far enough. Despair settled in, and I looked up at the night sky. The faint blue light of the moon, embedded within the starry expanse, teetered on the edge of disappearance. If that light were to fade, the blue moon would revert to an ordinary moon.

Time was running out. This was not good. I remembered my grandmother's words: "*People who can travel back to the past are those who strongly desire to go to that world.*"

With that profound wish resonating within me, I stepped onto the weathered wooden board beneath my feet and leaped into the sky. My body floated in the air, and then I dove through the water's surface, precisely where the blue moonlight reflected most prominently.

That was the place where the blue light reached its peak — the gateway to the past.

*

In that blue world, as the waves swayed and a profound silence enveloped me, I could feel the chilling absence of warmth draining from my body. With each exhale, my breath transformed into bubbles that ascended toward the water's surface, creating a symphony of soundless movement. I found myself submerged in a spring, the shadow of a magnificent full moon reflecting on the tranquil water.

Suddenly, with a splash, the moon's reflection split in two, and a girl descended slowly from the space between the halves. I swiftly caught her in the water, cradling her in my arms as I swam toward the shore. Once we reached solid ground, she took a deep breath, coughing slightly.

Supporting her under her arm, I carefully helped her onto the wooden board that rested above the spring. At the center of the spring was a large rock I used as a foothold. Facing the girl before me, I couldn't mistake her identity — she was Saki. This miniature version of seventeen-year-old Saki possessed the same bright eyes, now filled with tears.

She trembled, her shoulders shaking, as she gazed at the night sky. Eleven-year-old Saki desired to reach her mother on the moon. Placing my hand gently on her delicate shoulder, I uttered her name, “Saki.”

She lifted her gaze to meet mine and questioned, “Do you know who I am?”

Her expression was illuminated by the faint light of the blue moon. But I remained concealed within the shadows, invisible to her. All her features resembled Saki’s, yet they were still immature, resembling that of a child. In my eyes, accustomed to perceiving seventeen-year-old Saki as a cat, this child appeared as a vulnerable kitten.

However, I couldn’t answer her question calmly. Instead, anger welled within me. “Saki... why would you do such a thing?” Even though I should have known the reason behind her leap into the spring, from the seventeen-year-old Saki six years later, I could not bring myself to settle down. The elementary school-aged Saki before me was smaller and more delicate than I had imagined. I never wished for her to experience something like this again.

Saki’s tears poured forth, her voice conveying the anguish etched within her soul. “But I can’t bear it anymore! There are too many sorrows in this world... I can’t bear to live alone. I don’t want to be here anymore. I want to join my mother... Let me go!”

Her words resonated as a desperate plea. In response, I embraced her tightly, diverting her gaze away from the spring. The Saki in my arms was far smaller than the seventeen-year-old Saki I’d held a month ago. Such a fragile life could easily be consumed by the spring’s depths if she were to fall.

“Saki, don’t speak of such things.”

“But...”

I was already aware of the profound sadness that elementary school-aged Saki had endured, a sadness that had driven her to despair. Yet, I wished to voice my thoughts.

Loosening my hold slightly, I gazed into Saki’s eyes. Large tears clung to her face; no matter how much I wiped them, more would flow. I gripped her face with both hands and gently brushed away her tears with my thumbs.

“Saki, don’t give up on life.”

Her tears fell onto my hands, the heat seeping into my being, causing warmth to envelop my throat despite the pain. With determination, I said, “If you keep living, you will encounter kind-hearted people. Saki, I believe you will find happiness in the days to come.”

“What do you know about me?”

Surprised by the sudden halt in her tears, I slowly released her hands. I noticed the little star I carried wrapped in the bandage, now entangled in her hair. In that moment, the image of seventeen-year-old Saki, with a star ornament adorning her head, flashed vividly in my mind.

Oh, Saki, I thought.

“I met high school-aged Saki the other day.”

“Don’t lie.”

“It’s true. The high school-aged Saki was a very beautiful and kind girl. She had friends and enjoyed school. She said she was happy.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Saki was trying her best to live. That’s why kind people gathered around her. She had many siblings and lived happily.”

She was so beautiful that boys fell in love with her.

“I know the world you’re living in right now is really hard, but the world will surely change, so if you keep living, the future will be bright and shining.”

Her overflowing tears fell straight down her cheeks, making her vision blurry and her face indistinct. The time of the end must have been approaching.

I held Saki’s small hand and said, “So, no matter how painful it is now, keep on living. Don’t give up.” Her outline blurred, but I continued, “I’ll be waiting for you in the future, always.”

For a moment, her teary gaze met mine. The blue moonlight turned into a thin line and disappeared.

When I came to my senses, my world was pitch black, and only my words were floating in the depths of the spring. Saki had disappeared before my eyes, and before I knew it, I was alone in a forest covered in leaves.

Was it a dream? I denied it in my mind. It couldn't have been just a dream. I gently unwrapped the bandage on my little finger. The small fragment of a star I had hidden in the bandage was gone. The sensation of holding the little girl still remained in my arms, which made me feel relieved.

Surely, I had traveled to the past. I had saved Saki.

I fell in love with seventeen-year-old Saki when I first stumbled into the past during the blue moon day six years ago. Perhaps I had fallen in love with her to save eleven-year-old Saki in a world where she lived with the premise that future me would save her. I met high school Saki, fell in love with her, and went back to the past to tell elementary school Saki about her. Surely, I was born to meet her.

We were connected by the complex and tangled threads of fate. Even if I couldn't meet her in the future, as long as Saki was alive somewhere in this world, it would be enough.

Just knowing Saki was alive filled my heart with happiness. My tired eyelids grew heavy.

I'm glad I made it in time.

My consciousness faltered.

EPÍLOGUE

August 4, 2016

Dear Saki,

I don't know where to begin. Tomorrow, I return to Tokyo. When I arrived in this town and met you at the spring, it was the first time I'd experienced love at first sight.

The moment my eyes met yours, I felt something indescribable. You held an aura of uniqueness, and it captivated me instantly. Within just four days, I fell deeply and irrevocably in love with you.

I had heard about your first love and contemplated keeping my feelings to myself and silently departing. However, my emotions surged uncontrollably, and I could no longer contain them. Therefore, I pour out my heart in this letter, knowing it will never reach your hands, hoping to find solace.

Saki, I love you. Every fiber of my being is consumed by this love.

Yours truly,
Keiichi Tani

"I'm so grateful that we crossed paths."

On the last day of the blue moon, Keiichi had uttered those words to me, gently releasing the hand that had held mine, and departed from the forest. After a while, I followed him.

I rushed out of the forest, toward the town of Arashiyama, but it was too late. He had vanished, and without his phone number or address, I had no means to search for him any further.

I scolded myself for allowing my heart to be swayed by someone other than my first love. It was my mistake to desire to be by Keiichi's side despite cherishing my initial love.

With conflicted feelings, I chastised myself as I returned to the dormitory. The blue moon had already vanished from the sky. As I approached the mountain path, a white paper hanging from a distant tree branch caught my eye.

Normally, an out-of-reach white paper would not have captured my attention. However, this one felt inexplicably special. I made my way through the back alley to reach it. Unfolding the torn and worn white paper, my eyes widened in surprise.

It was a letter addressed to me. As I read the letter, titled *Dear Saki*, tears naturally welled. Did he long to be with me simply because he found solace in my presence? Did he desire more conversations and shared moments together? Keiichi-kun had been thinking of me.

Tears streamed down my cheeks as I read the letter again, tracing its words with my finger and stopping at the final line. The date indicated today, six years in the future. Could he have come from the future? In that moment, I felt an inexplicable connection.

"I'll be waiting for you in the future, always." Was it Keiichi-kun who had given me a reason to keep living on that night six years ago, claiming to have traveled from the future? It may seemed like a convenient thought, but I could not comprehend this passionate feeling without embracing it. My heart trembled whenever I saw Keiichi-kun because he was undoubtedly the person I was once more destined to fall in love with.

"I met high school-aged Saki the other day."

Could it be that I had fallen in love with the same person twice? Would Keiichi-kun continue to meet the younger version of me in the past? I could no longer ask him these questions, but deep within, I believed it to be true. I must have fallen in love with him twice — once with the one who traveled back in time, and again with the one I was destined to meet.

*

“Keiichi, are you going to the club today and then coming back?”

“The club, grandma?”

“Oh, was it different?”

“It’s actually a circle.”

“Right, right, you call it circle.”

“I’m not going to the circle today. I have the day off from work, and I plan to come back early.”

“Can you buy some croquettes from Nakamura-ya on your way back?”

“Sure.”

Three years had elapsed since that summer when I was seventeen. Since then, I had gathered materials from universities in Kyoto and the surrounding towns and taken the exams. I managed to pass one of them, and now was a second-year student at that university.

I chose to come to Kyoto out of concern for my grandmother, who lived alone, and because I fell in love with this town where I used to visit and play during my childhood. The desire to explore and learn more about Kyoto drew me to this place.

Now, I lived with my grandma, and our relationship was still harmonious. I’d been leading a peaceful and stable life here in Kyoto.

Today’s classes ended after the fourth period. With no plans to attend any club activities or work, I found myself with some free time. I briefly considered finding something to do on campus but ultimately decided to head home. I also needed to buy croquettes for my grandma. However, it was a bit early for that.

A change of heart prompted me to get off at Kawaramachi Station and take a stroll along the nostalgic streets. What unfolded before my eyes was a townscape teeming with memories. Some of the stores on Shinkyōgoku-dori, the street that I had frequented with Saki, had transformed into new establishments. However, they still sold skewered cucumber pickles in soy sauce, and the game arcade was still operating.

I stopped in front of the game arcade. It was here we had taken purikura photos and engaged in conversations. I recalled how Saki stared at me when I accidentally bumped into a stranger girl.

The memories of my time with Saki continued to resurface vividly, but she was no longer by my side. Would our paths ever cross again? At times, I found myself on the verge of giving up. Yet, my heart flared with intense emotions each time these memories flooded back. I still loved her. The flame of passion within me had not diminished.

For six years, from the age of eleven to seventeen, she'd patiently waited for me. In comparison, I had only endured three years of separation. I resolved to stop suppressing my overwhelming feelings. It was still too early to surrender. With these thoughts in mind, I wandered through the streets of Kyoto that I had once traversed with Saki, cherishing those precious memories.

Suddenly, the voices of some girls emerged from a nearby shop. "Hey, did you know? Seika's solo exhibition is happening on Sanjō right now." "Really? I adore Seika's paintings. Shall we go and have a look?"

"Absolutely, let's go!"

Although I had never heard the name Seika, it stirred something within me. I glanced at my right hand and noticed the poster the girls had been discussing. At the top, it read, *Seika Komiya's First Solo Exhibition*, followed by the address and a simple map.

I felt a yearning to see those paintings. Unconsciously, my feet guided me toward the arcade where the girls had disappeared. The gallery was tucked away in a quiet corner amidst the bustling town. Upon entering the serene and brightly lit space, a woman at reception greeted me with a warm smile.

"Hello. Welcome."

I nodded in response. It was my first time in a space called a gallery. From a distance, I could see paintings of different sizes displayed in partitioned spaces made of standing panels.

The woman at the reception explained, "In Kyoto, young artists often hold solo exhibitions in old houses or cafés." Overwhelmed by the unfamiliar

environment, I couldn't move.

"This place used to be a café, too," she continued. "We want as many people as possible to see the works of promising young artists."

I stayed silent, taking in her words.

"Seika-san is also one of them," she said clearly while looking at a painting in the distance from where she stood at reception. It was evident that she was a fan of this artist.

Her gaze fixated on the distant painting, her eyes gentle and her voice calm yet powerful. "Please take your time," she added, and finally, I started moving.

The exhibition showcased watercolor paintings, with several beautiful and transparent artworks lined up. I stopped to admire them.

The first painting depicted a boy and a girl happily eating croquettes. In the background, a butcher stood, and the boy and girl relished their croquettes wrapped in white paper.

The second painting portrayed two individuals gazing up at a tree abundant with leaves. However, there was a peculiar aspect to this artwork. The green, youthful leaves grew so densely that they formed a protective canopy, almost like a roof. Although the painting conveyed a sense of summer, cherry blossom petals floated down into the shallow river at their feet. A girl gazed upward at the trees, accompanied by a boy standing beside her. A single cherry blossom petal rested in the palm of the boy's hand.

The third painting captured Kamogawa River and Sanjō Ōhashi Bridge at night. The riverbed provided a quick glimpse of both the river and the bridge. Two people stood, holding coffee mugs, while the blue moonlight shimmered on the flowing Kamogawa River. The lively conversation between the two individuals in a special Kyoto night café seemed to bring them great joy.

The fourth painting showcased Suzumushi Temple. In front of an illuminated Jizo statue, two people stood. The girl held a yellow amulet inscribed with the word happiness, seemingly making a wish. With his hand in his pocket, the boy gazed at the blue moon shining in the night sky.

Lastly, the fifth painting depicted a spring. A girl squatted at the edge of the spring, holding an umbrella upside down and dipping it into the water. Countless stars seemed to gather inside the umbrella. Beside her stood the same boy as before, his eyes filled with gentleness and affection as he observed her side profile illuminated by the blue light.

As I observed the paintings, memories I had tucked away resurfaced, and her artwork intertwined with them. A warm feeling welled in my eyes as I finally found it.

Then, I discovered the sixth large painting in a separate space partitioned by a folding screen panel. Stepping into that space, emotions consumed me, because the world within it was painted in a striking blue hue. A stunning full moon, depicted on a canvas as tall as me, hovered over a blue spring. A boy, with half his body outside the spring, faced a little girl, but his face remained hidden as he looked backward.

I was drawn closer and examined the girl's expression. At first glance, it seemed as though she was crying out in pain. But upon closer inspection, tears overflowed from her eyes while her expression remained soft, and she smiled joyfully. A small star adorned her right ear, shining brightly.

Then, my attention shifted to the letters attached to the white space beside the painting. Slowly, I moved my feet and positioned myself before those letters. They revealed the title of this exhibition.

As I read the title, memories flooded my mind, bringing back the gentle and kind words she had spoken after we had purchased a beautiful book from a bookstore in Kyoto.

"The words on this obi are also lovely."

"Don't you think these words are meant for one's destined partner?" she had said, her voice etching itself into my heart.

As her voice echoed in my thoughts, I shifted my gaze toward the exhibition's title and found myself overcome with emotion. Tears cascaded down my face in a steady stream, but I made no attempt to wipe them away. Instead, I continued to stare at the words before me.

To the one and only you in the world — all the paintings are for you, were the words inscribed there.

“Excuse me,” I heard a familiar voice say. It was expansive, with a slightly alto-tinted tone that stood out among the sopranos. Her voice awakened my senses, and I swiftly wiped away my tears with my arm, turning to face the source. Standing there was a girl with the pen name Seika, written as *Hoshi no Hana* but pronounced as Seika; it was Saki, who had grown into an adult and become more of an older sister figure to me, yet I could still catch glimpses of the seventeen-year-old girl in her eyes.

She wore a nostalgic star-shaped hair accessory, glistening in her ear, and her large brown eyes trembled as she spoke with a quivering voice.

“Keiichi... is that you?”

I nodded silently.

She took a moment, her gaze shifting downwards, and a tear escaped from her eye. As if she had forgotten how to contain the overflow of emotions, I approached her gently and placed my hand on her head.

“Saki...”

That was all I could manage to say. She kept looking down, her voice barely audible as she murmured toward my sneakers, “Yeah. I’ve been waiting... for a long time.”

I had promised her in the past that I would wait for her in the future, but how long had I made her wait? From the eleven-year-old Saki who had crossed paths with me to the twenty-six-year-old Saki standing before me now...

“I’ve been longing to see you too... for a long time.”

I made a solemn vow to shower her with love from that moment onward, pouring in not just fifteen years’ worth but an abundance of affection. Our past and future had seamlessly intertwined, forever connected.



“Out of the blue, do you think it’s okay if we go now?”

“Of course, Grandma will be happy too. Oh, before that, can we stop by Nakamura-ya and buy some croquettes? Grandma asked me to get some,” I asked.

“Nakamura-ya, the croquette shop from last time?” said Saki.

“Yes, that’s the one.”

“I think I’ll buy one too.”

“Don’t just get one. Eat as many as you want. I’m planning to buy thirty of them.”

“Are you going to eat all of them?”

“I will. Don’t you like to eat, Saki?”

“Then, I’ll eat too.”

Saki smiled cheerfully and suggested, “Oh, I have to buy a souvenir for your grandma too.”

“It’s okay. Don’t worry about it,” I told her.

“But...” Saki hesitated.

“We’re going to come here frequently from now on,” I assured her.

“Is that okay?”

“I want you to come,” I replied.

“Okay, I’m happy to,” she said, her voice filled with joy.

Guided by the blue light of the moon, we had met and fallen in love countless times. And this love would continue on and on forever.

“Oh, Keiichi-kun, a shooting star,” she pointed out.

“I saw it,” I whispered, holding her small hand as we began to walk.

“I love you, Saki,” I confessed.

“You are the one I love the most in the world.”

The streets of Arashiyama seemed more radiant than usual.

THE CONTINUATION OF OUR LOVE STORY, DISCOVERED ON THE NIGHT
OF THE BLUE MOON, HAD JUST BEGUN.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mii Hirose, born in January under the sign of Capricorn, currently resides in Shiga Prefecture.

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